

ML Update : 23-29 June 2009

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Lalgarh's Battle for Dignity and Justice

A concerted paramilitary campaign is now underway in Lalgarh and surrounding areas in the tribal-dominated western region of West Bengal bordering Jharkhand and Orissa, ostensibly to flush out Maoists and restore the authority of the state. The campaign though being carried out by the state government is being actively guided and sponsored by the Union Home Ministry. The Union Home Minister has warned that the operation may take longer than expected and has appealed to political leaders and civil society organizations not to visit Lalgarh while the operation is on. Mamata Banerjee has called for declaring the three districts of West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia a disturbed area. The Union Home Ministry has meanwhile included the CPI(Maoist) in the list of unlawful associations under the recently amended Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

Chidambaram's appeal against civilian visits to Lalgarh, coming apparently after a group of Left Front MPs wrote to the Prime Minister seeking his personal intervention to this effect, clearly shows that the government wants to keep the operation beyond the purview of public scrutiny. This is as good as an indirect admission about the real nature and purpose of Operation Lalgarh - a brutal war on the adivasis who had been offering such a determined resistance to state repression. In the absence of independent investigations, the actual extent of casualties and injuries inflicted by the ongoing operation is not really known. But hundreds of people have already been forced to flee and there are disturbing reports that the paramilitary forces are forcing local adivasi youth under duress to locate mines and explosives - under threat that they will be arrested as 'Maoists' if they refuse.

Lalgarh had first shot into national prominence in November last year when the local adivasis in their thousands revolted against police atrocities following an unsuccessful Maoist mine attack targeting the Chief Minister's cavalcade. The resistance has since continued unabated and during the recent elections the state had to negotiate with the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) which is spearheading the resistance, for setting up polling booths outside the resistance area. The state was obviously waiting for an opportune moment and pretext to go for a crackdown. The opportunity came when Lalgarh recently erupted again against provocations by local CPI(M) leaders and Maoists made tall claims regarding their leading role in the Lalgarh resistance and dared the state to intervene.

At the heart of it, Lalgarh is a typical adivasi revolt against repression and injustice. The entire history of our anti-colonial struggle is replete with many such instances and the Indian state today has no problem recognizing the leaders of those revolts as popular heroes. In the eyes of the oppressed and deprived tribal people the Indian state in all these years has not really changed much and retains many of the colonial era trappings of utter insensitivity and unbridled brutality. But

when the inheritors of Birsa Munda, Sidho-Kanu and Tilka Manjhi revolt against this contemporary reality, our post-colonial democratic system knows no other way but to declare a virtual war on these seekers of justice. It should be noted that the allegations of police atrocities made by the PCAPA have been found to be true by a senior official of the West Bengal government (Backward Classes Welfare Secretary RD Meena) but instead of taking adequate corrective measures as demanded by the PCAPA the state government has only announced meagre compensation of only a few thousand rupees to the eleven women victims of police repression!

For the UPA government and its belligerent Home Minister who managed to win the recent election by administratively converting defeat into victory, Lalgarh is a test case to unleash a new pattern of governance in which paramilitary forces will become the custodian of constitutional niceties. There is also the larger political gameplan to trap the ruling Left of West Bengal in an increasingly repressive role while the Congress plays the benefactor and monopolises the mask of welfare measures!

For the people of West Bengal, Operation Lalgarh is a political eye-opener. During the recent elections, Mamata Banerjee claimed to champion the cause of the struggles in Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh and the TMC-Congress combined reaped a bumper electoral harvest. Elections over, it is now time to thank the people and what could be a more suitable gift than Operation Lalgarh! Mamata Banerjee now says that the TMC expelled the PCAPA chief Chhatradhar Mahato two years ago when it came to know about his Maoist link! Chhatradhar says he was never expelled but quit the TMC when he found it incapable of meeting the tribals' needs. He then recalls how following the killing of three PCAPA members in police firing in February, Mamata Banerjee had visited Jangalmahal, shed tears and said, 'If these people are Maoists, then I too am a Maoist.' "We never doubted her sincerity then", says Chhatradhar. But he realizes that the circumstances have now changed: "after the elections, the same Mamata Banerjee got a Cabinet post, joined the government at the Centre, which in turn sent paramilitary forces to Lalgarh. Therefore, it is quite natural for Banerjee now to link me with the Maoists."

It is also important to look at the doublespeak of the CPI(M) leadership. Prakash Karat says the Maoists need to be politically isolated from the people they are mobilizing even as Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee demands more central forces and Sitaram Yechuty asks the Prime Minister to demonstrate his seriousness in tackling what his government claims to be the biggest threat to internal security! On the one hand, the government spearheads a paramilitary operation, and the MPs seek personal intervention of the Prime Minister to prevent political leaders from visiting the operation area, and on the other hand the party talks of fighting a political battle against Maoists! If the CPI(M) thinks that all this can be justified by invoking the party-government distinction and that the Centre-state or Congress-CPI(M) cooperation in 'restoring the authority of the state' in Lalgarh could help check the TMC's advance, it is only deceiving itself.

As for the Maoists, they have only once again demonstrated the incompatibility of their ideas and actions with the needs of any radical people's movement. With their penchant for exclusive and sensational military actions and aversion to the mass political process, they ultimately only produce a dampening and disruptive effect on any powerful people's movement while letting the Mamata Banerjees reap the political benefit of people's struggles and sacrifices.

We join the democratic opinion of the country and the justice-loving people of Lalgarh to demand an immediate end to the paramilitary offensive, withdrawal of paramilitary forces and a negotiated resolution of the conflict through fulfillment of the just demands of the Lalgarh people and quick redressal of all their long-standing grievances. We also do not support the idea of banning the CPI(Maoist) as a terrorist organization. The Maoists are anyway an underground organization and the experience of states like Chhattisgarh and Orissa where they have been banned for years clearly

shows that the ban has been ineffective from the point of view of checking Maoist military actions. The ban is actually a weapon to terrorise the common people and stifle the democratic voice of protest. The case of Dr. Binayak Sen is a clear instance and for every Binayak Sen case that comes to the limelight, there are always hundreds of lesser known activists and ordinary men and women whose human rights continue to be brutally trampled upon.

Victory to Lalgarh's glorious
battle for dignity and justice!

Workers' Protests in TN against DMK Govt.

Tamil Nadu assembly session began on 17 June. It was greeted with protests from urban and rural poor, organized and unorganized workers and agricultural labourers all over the state against the failure to fulfil the promises made by the DMK Govt. to the people of TN.

When the corporate media is predicting doom for the red flag in our country, hundreds of workers all over TN led by AICCTU and AIALA came onto the streets in demonstrations held at the dist HQs holding the red flag high and declaring that the CPI(ML) will give a befitting reply for the wishful predictions of the corporate media and the ruling classes. After elections these were the first protest in TN. Meanwhile, the CPM-CPI-led Left in the State is planning floor coordination with AIADMK.

Com. S.Kumarasami, addressing the workers in Chennai from TIDC, Hyundai, MRF, Carborundum and the unorganized workers of Chennai, said that if DMK government continues to neglect the burning issues of the workers of TN, it will be thrown away in the 2011 Assembly elections. Com. Balasundaram, State Secretary, who spoke before a gathering of scores of unorganised workers in Salem, pointed out that the Union Textile Minister Mr. Dayanidhi Maran has come to Coimbatore to meet the industrialists there and did not care to visit and meet the Pricol workers who are on an indefinite fast against the victimization on the part of the management and demanding the DMK govt to intervene immediately in their issue and invoke 10 B of IDA, 1947, to restore industrial peace and protect employment.

Though the demonstrations were held at short notice, AICCTU and AIALA mobilized more than 2500 rural and urban poor all over the State. In Kanyakumari more than 750 workers participated in the demonstration. In Tirunelveli more than 600 unorganised workers took part in the demonstration. In Coimbatore, more than 350 Pricol workers, whose comrades were undergoing a fast unto death from 15 June, raised demand for trade union recognition. In Tiruvallore district more than 350 rural poor marched toward collector's office demanding 5-cent house site patta. Demonstrations were also held at Gandarvakottai and Kumdrandarkoil of Pudukottai district, two places in Villupuram and at two centres in Namakkal district, Tiruverumbur of trichy and Kattumannargudi of Cuddalore district.

Following are some slogans of the above movement around which the main demands are centred: "Amend Trade Union Act 1926, to provide for Trade Union Recognition!", "Secure Presidential Assent for the Amendment in Standing Orders Act enacted by the TN govt to safeguard the rights of workers exploited in the name of trainees!", "Give 5 cent house stead patta for urban and rural poor!", "200 days of work and wage of Rs.200/day under NREGA!" and "2 acres of land for all agricultural labourers and rural poor!".

Pricol Workers on Indefinite Fast

Workers of the Pricol factory who are conducting a protracted struggle against the management for more than 2 years, are on an indefinite fast from 15 June 2009 demanding that the TN government intervene to resolve their issues.

As per the long term settlement, the management was to give DA and a raise in salary once in July 2007 and again in July 2008. This amounts to Rs.948 to Rs.1498 per worker. There are over 1500 workers. This increase is given as notice pay only when workers are dismissed but this wage increase is not paid while they are in service. The balance sheet of the company for the financial year 2008 - 2009 shows that the expenditure under the head "salary" (employees cost) has decreased, which never happens under normal circumstances.

Workers, in the name of being trainees and contract labourers, are employed in works of permanent nature. The labour department sent its officials and conducted a raid and has found for itself that trainees and contract labourers are employed in works of permanent nature. The labour department has already issued show cause notices to the management on these two issues.

Now the workers have demanded the government intervene on these issues. Reminding that the government itself has indicted the management, the workers are demanding that the government pass orders under section 10 B of ID Act, 1947 directing the management to clear the DA and wage increase due for the workers and stop employing trainees and contract labourers in works of permanent nature.

The management is going on a victimization spree since the workers formed their union and it has intensified it in the recent months to the extent of cutting their salary on flimsy grounds down to Rs.1500. June being time for school and college admission and paying fees, which is exorbitant in TN, workers had no other way but to take up a form of struggle that would draw the general public in the area in large numbers.

Twenty nine workers including 5 women workers began their indefinite fast in the union office which is situated near the plant. The management switched off even the flash lights on its building which was lighting the union office entrance too, where the workers were on fast and which was busy day and night and flooded with workers of other factories in and around Perianaickenpalayam, relatives and neighbours of the fasting workers.

Police officials on Day 1 tried to arrest the workers on the charges of 'attempting suicide'. But the union gave a representation to the police explaining that they are not on fast unto death but on indefinite fast, that their purpose is not to die but to press their just demands and they have taken up this form only to live in dignity.

The TN assembly session began on June 17 and a team of Pricol workers went to Chennai and met the Labour Minister, MLAs asking them to raise their demands in the assembly. AIADMK and PMK MLAs moved resolution for a discussion on the Pricol workers issue in the assembly.

Pricol workers distributed 50,000 pamphlets in Coimbatore to propagate the message of the struggle to the people at large. Over 100 flex boards carrying the photograph of the fasting workers were erected on the highways from Mettupalayam to Coimbatore covering more than 30 km. More than 1000 workers who are continuing work are on lunch boycott from 16 June and there was no call or instruction from the union for this action and the workers themselves have taken up this measure to express their solidarity with those who are on indefinite fast.

Workers of TIDC went on a lunch boycott on 22 June in solidarity. Hyundai Motors India Employees Union released a poster in support of Pricol workers' struggle. Arun Kumar, ex-MLA of the DMK, and Eswaran of Kongu Munnetra Kazhagam met the workers and expressed their solidarity. Kongu Munnetra Kazhagam also held a demonstration in support of the fasting workers.

When the struggle of the workers is gathering support from various quarters, the management has embarked on a two pronged strategy of wooing the workers with payment of arrears on the one hand and threatening the workers with action against them on the other hand on various previous charges. But the workers are in no mood to relent.

Punjab Convention

On 20 June, a Convention in solidarity with the ongoing land movement was organized by CPI(ML) Liberation and Majdoor Mukti Morcha at Teachers' Home, Bathinda. The Convention was presided over by a presidium comprising comrades Tarsem Jodhan of the CPI(ML)(Liberation), Tara Chand (Inquilabi Kendra), Gurdyal Bhatti (Democratic Employees Front), Tarsem Peter (Paindu Majdoor Union- CPI(ML) New Democracy), Dr. Ajitpal (Lok Sangram Manch), Chandrashekhar (MCPI-United), Gurpreet of CPI(ML) (Liberation) and Hasmeet (RYA). In his opening speech Comrade Tarsem Jodhan welcomed all other Left organizations and paid tribute to the late Comrade Jeeta Kaur. All the leaders of Left parties and labour organizations at the Convention condemned the state repression and expressed their support for the struggle. It was decided in a joint meeting that state wide conventions would be held from July 10-17 with the following demands: (1) Unconditional release of labourers and leaders, (2) Implementation of the 19 May agreement, (3) NREGA card for all labourers and extension of NREGA to 200 days, as well as compulsory work under NREGA for at least one woman from every family, (4) Daily wages to be increased to cope with inflation, (5) Minimum wages to be strictly implemented

On 23 June, the death anniversary of Comrade Jeeta Kaur, memorial cum pledge taking meetings to intensify the movement are to be held all over the state. On 26 June - anniversary of the infamous Emergency, CPI(ML) will hold state-wide protests, pointing out that the Akali Dal, which always projects itself as being a victim of the 1975 Emergency, is now imposing an 'emergency-like' situation on the rural poor of Punjab.

Police-sponsored Media Stories Branding CPI(ML) as 'Banned'

(The Punjab Pulse page of The Indian Express, Chandigarh edition, published this outright baseless and defamatory story about CPI(ML). This appeared on June 13, story done by Harpreet Bajwa. We reproduce excerpts from the article followed by a commentary)

Naxalism raising its ugly head again?

Police were in for a rude shock last month when the frontal organisations of the banned Naxal outfit CPI(M-L) took forceful possession of more than 200 acres of land in 40 villages of Mansa and Sangrur districts and marked out five-marla plots for poor landless labourers, mostly Dalits. The district authorities acted swiftly and freed the plots, returning them to the panchayats concerned. The police arrested 1,300 people, mainly activists of CPI(M-L), and booked them for forceful possession of land and obstructing government officials from performing their duties. Among those arrested was top Naxal leader Swapan Mukherjee, member of the CPI(M-L) central committee. He

was allegedly spearheading the movement. Many other state-level leaders were arrested too, said sources.

The CPI(M-L) had then claimed that the government action of taking back the land was not justified. "As per the land consolidation schemes, Dalit agriculture labourers have one-third right on common land. They had thus only claimed what was their right, which had been denied to them", the outfit had said. "An incident of taking forceful possession of land by Naxal activists has happened after decades", said a police officer.

He added: "This shows they are now raising their voice openly against the government, but in a peaceful manner, which is the third stage in the Naxalism strategy." Naxals have been found to follow a five-point strategy – first they study an area, then they setup their cadre there, followed by vocal criticism of the government and peaceful agitation. In the next stage, they restore to violence and finally setup a parallel authority.

A few Naxal leaders from the state are in the national executive of the frontal organisations of banned Naxal outfits such as the People's War Group and CPI(M-L). There are 20-odd such organisations in the state, with nearly 2,000 hardcore members. The regular members include farmers, students, employees, agricultural labourers, industry labourers and rice millers, according to the police.

Several stories appeared in the Punjabi dailies and in the Indian Express which tried to paint the CPI(ML) as a 'banned' terrorist outfit. A sample can be seen in the above story.

The fact that the CPI(ML) is a registered political party, which has been contesting elections regularly, and even contested the recent Lok Sabha elections in Bathinda and Sangrur in Punjab, polling around 8000 votes each; or the fact that Comrade Swapan Mukherjee, a Central Committee member of the party, is the all India General Secretary of the All India Central Council of Trade Unions, which enjoys recognition as a Central Trade Union Organization (CTUO) by the Ministry of Labour, Government of India – did not stop the Punjab Govt and police from putting out this slander; and the papers obediently carried this 'news' mischievously fed to it by police or Punjab Government sources.

Note that the police source quoted in the story himself concedes that the movement was 'peaceful', but suggests that such peaceful means are just a "stage in the Naxalism strategy," suggesting that future strategy would include "violence" and finally "set(ing) up a parallel authority"! This fairytale about 'stages in Naxal strategy' may sound ridiculous. But there's a method in the madness. The police source's statement is revealing – it suggests that the Punjab Government and police are trying to brand any peaceful mass movements critical of the Governments, as proof of 'terrorist' intent, to justify arresting and jailing thousands. This is in line with the policy being advocated by the Manmohan Government as well – and the ban on Maoists is only intended to further serve this end. Draconian laws – in Chhattisgarh, for instance, only seek to legitimise and lend strength to such practices that are already in place.

Economic Crisis Increases Risk of Girls Becoming Child Labourers

The global financial crisis could push an increasing number of children, particularly girls, into child labour, according to a new report issued by the International Labour Office (ILO) for the World Day Against Child Labour on June 12. The report says the danger of girls being forced into child labour is linked to evidence that in many countries families give preference to boys when making decisions on education of children. It states that because of the increase in poverty as result of the crisis poor families with a number of children may have to make choices as to which children stay in school. In cultures in which a higher value is placed on education of male children, girls risk being taken out of school, and are then likely to enter the workforce at an early age.

Other factors which could push up the numbers in child labour include cuts in national education budgets, and a decline in remittances of migrant workers, as these remittances often help to keep children in school. Protecting girls - and all children - from child labour calls for integrated responses that include jobs for parents, and social protection measures that help them to keep both girls and boys in school.

The ILO report says the most recent global estimate indicated that more than 100 million girls are involved in child labour, and many are exposed to some of its worst forms. Girls face a number of particular problems that justify special attention.

P.S.

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