

India: Defend Trade Union Rights, Resist the Attack on Government Employees and on Strikes/Bandhs

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The new convert is often the most aggressive. So it is with Purnendu Basu, ex-Naxalite who was once a believer in boycotting elections as a matter of principle. Now that he has himself been elected, and even blessed with the great fortune of becoming Minister of Labour, the usual post reserved for ex-left turncoats, Basu has been blustering quite a bit about labour rights. He has suddenly discovered that government employees are not workers, and they cannot have trade union rights. He has also exclaimed that government employees cannot publicly oppose the government. He is, in fact the focal point through which the West Bengal government is signalling to the ruling class the real meaning of West Bengal's 'parivartan'.

For liberal theory, nobody has the right to form a union, and nobody has the right to strike. According to liberal theory, labour contracts are freely arrived at between the contracting worker and the owner. To form a union is to coerce the free initiative of the individual. There can be little doubt that this is true. Whoever has heard of workers getting pay rise and other benefits because of sweetness and generous nature of the boss? A strike is a coercive instrument whereby the exploited stand up, collectively, to force or wring out of the unwilling hands of the exploiters what individual pleas cannot get. A trade union is therefore the most heinous of all institutions, and cannot be given the recognition of being a civil society association, unlike that paragon of organisation, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Now that Basu has finally found the light, therefore, he is willing to go to all lengths to stop false unions. He has even informed us that government employees are not workers. Probably he might even start talking about whether they produce surplus value or not.

The issue is not debating Basu. Basu is not some erring Marxist or leftist who has got his theories and ideas scrambled. The issue is to resist and fight back for Basu is here simply the voice and hand of the ruling class. Government employees are among the most organised in West Bengal. It is their strength that has been key to the inflation being at least partially set off for a considerable part of the salary/wage earning masses, through the regular Dearness Allowance that the government pays. Behind Basu's bluster is this hard reality.

Of course, the ideology behind which the bourgeoisie is hiding globally today is the rhetoric of democracy. Even Saudi Arabia has joined hands with the US to establish democracy in Syria. As we all know, Saudi Arabia is the bastion of democracy. So, nobody will say openly that they are opposed to democratic rights. But the democratic counter-revolution that liberalism wants today is one that tears away a significant part of democratic rights. As Basu and Ananda Bazar Patrika have both remarked, they are opposed to political parties entering the workplace. Unions mean parties. So what they are willing to live with, at the moment, are tame "associations" that have no teeth and that are purged of politics. We too would like a single union in every trade. But for the opposite reasons and in the opposite way. We would like all workers to be united in democratically organised multi-tendency trade unions, in which all political currents whom the workers themselves accept can

function openly. The claim that there should be no politics in the workplace itself is a political claim. It is based on a model of bourgeois parliamtary politics where only parties with massive funds can contest elections and go to the Assemblies and parliament. They alone will decide policy. This will enable the ruling class to successfully get rid of a whole range of issues that working people raise through their forms of politics – issues like freedom of organisation, opposition to capitalist financialisation and policies that pump money from the poor to the rich, from workers and poor peasants to the bourgeoisie.

The attack on government employees is part of a wider attack – attacks on students' right to contest union elections, attacks on campus democracy in the form of changes in University Acts that have resulted in throwing out many of the sectors involved in education from policy making bodies, and so on, but above all attacks on the working classes and their livelihood. That Basu was not merely a neo-conservative cured of his former Naxalite thinking, but a genuine mouthpiece of the ruling class, has been established by Ms. Mamata Bandyopadhyay, who has gone further ahead to declare that she and her government will not tolerate bandhs. Apparently, they create problems for ordinary citizens. Obviously, a general strike will create problems. But it is not the ordinary citizen of the imagined liberal universe who is most put off by bandhs. The capitalist leaders have repeatedly complained that strikes make it harder for them to invest. So in rapid succession, we are now seeing many efforts under way to silence all protests by workers. What we need immediately are public shows of resistance. Government employees and especially their militant unions have a responsibility – to discuss the issues with other sectors, and to launch, not one off actions or token demonstrations, but sustained drives for wider unionisation and resistance to the fiat of the government. But all unions have to resist these moves. The most serious responsibility falls on those trade unions and those political forces who understand that this is no matter of sectoral battles, but a battle of class against class. They are the ones who have to take the initiative in forging the widest united front of all organised unions, including, wherever the slightest possibility exists, even of workers supporting the INTTUC or government employees associations supporting the Trinamul Congress. Any sectarianism, any call for united front that excludes the CITU and the INTTUC are erroneous. The question is not of the bourgeois leaders of the INTTUC or the renegade social democrats of CITU. The question is of ensuring that workers in these unions are involved in struggles. If those workers had already been ready to break with their leaders, the unions would have been empty shells. But the reality is, those unions still have the support of big contingents of workers, indeed more workers than the radical unions. So sectarianism to these union leaders is actually sectarianism to the workers behind them, and a self-defeating exercise if we want to build real mass struggles. Radical socialist pledges to fight for the rights of all employees to organise, to organise democratically in multi-tendency unions, and to express their political views without the threat of sackings, breaks in service etc being held out against them.

*Build a united front of all workers to resist the attacks on unions
Resist the attacks on unions, unionise the unorganised
Solidarity for all strikers.*

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P.S.

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