

ML Update, 24-30 JULY 2007

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Contents

- [Conscience and Cross-Voting in](#)
- [Workers Protest Violation of](#)
- [People's Initiatives in \(...\)](#)

Conscience and Cross-Voting in the Presidential Polls

Much as anticipated, the UPA nominee Pratibha Patil has made it to Raisina Hill. She polled nearly twice the number of votes as her NDA rival Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. In addition to the votes of the UPA constituents and the Left, the support of Mayawati also proved decisive.

The race was not closely fought and the winner was a foregone conclusion; yet this Presidential election, seen as a forerunner of the next Parliamentary polls in 2009, generated the heat and dust of a high-pitched political contest. For now, the Presidential poll outcome has served to highlight the disarray in the NDA and the isolation of the BJP. Having dishonestly projected Shekhawat (a life-long BJP and RSS leader) as an “independent” candidate, the BJP has found that it is in fact their own MLAs – in Gujarat, MP, Chhattisgarh who have proved to be “independent” of their party!

The ironies of “conscience” in our parliamentary and public life also played out dramatically in this election. The CPI(M) vouched for the secular conscience of the Congress nominee. The BJP leadership appealed to voters to heed the “voice of their conscience” to vote across party lines. And wonder of wonders, it was the communal conscience of that Shiv Sena, the closest ideological ally of the BJP in the NDA, which was moved to support the secular candidate selected from among various Congress possibles by the CPI-CPI(M)! Some BJP legislators in Madhya Pradesh apparently chose to display their particular brand of conscience and defiance by writing ‘Om’ and ‘Jai Shri Ram’ across the ballots to invalidate them.

Reacting to the UNPA’s announcement of a decision to abstain, the BJP attempted to get the EC to exercise its authority. While the Election Commission recognized the democratic right to abstain, it declared that parties were not allowed to issue whips on such how their members to vote. According to the EC, in Presidential elections or elections to the Rajya Sabha, legislators get a certain licence: voting behaviour that in the House would be castigated and penalised as “floor-crossing” and horse-trading would now become a lofty exercise of conscience. Parties that issued a whip to abstain would risk inviting penalties for attempting “undue influence” on the election process. Former Chief Election Commissioner GVG Krishna Murthy put the same point across more baldly. He proclaimed that it was a “duty” to vote and for a party to call upon its members to abstain amounted to a “threat”. In other words, to invoke inner-party democracy and discipline is to go against the “duty” so dear to the ruling class: the duty of bending democracy to fit the two-party paradigm. Smaller players must either join the two teams or quit the game.

Before long we are going to have another UPA-Left consensus candidate for the Vice President’s office, symbolising the growing political convergence between the two tiers of the ruling

dispensation (the UPA and its supporters 'from without'). A woman in the Rashtrapati Bhavan and a backward Muslim in the Vice President's chair will now be projected and celebrated as empowerment of the weaker and marginalized sections of society. The people of India, however, know better. Lived experience of the past 60 years have convinced them that such superficial symbols are poor substitutes for the real struggle for empowerment.

Workers Protest Violation of Labour Laws

Government Brands Them 'Anti-Development'

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. Protests 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.

People's Initiatives in Jharkhand

Although Latehar district in Jharkhand is being considered in governmental propaganda as one of the leading districts in terms of NREGA implementation, the people are living in extreme poverty. Despite immense forest and mineral wealth of the area the truth is that every scheme meant for the rural poor is being appropriated by middlemen and politician nexus. The two Assembly

constituencies of the region are represented by RJD MLAs who are only interested in appropriating the development funds. The area is facing a drought this year, as was the last year, and people may not be able to harvest their corn crop which happens to be the major source of their livelihood. Majority of the poor have not been provided with the BPL or Antyodaya cards, though many well-to-do families are enjoying these facilities. Moreover, the PDS has been rendered completely ineffective by diverting food-grain to the open market by the nexus of the middlemen and the bureaucracy.

When the CPI(ML) gave a call to gherao the officials, people came out spontaneously in large numbers despite the busy agricultural season. This is indicative of the fact that the people are looking for a real alternative against the politics of the ruling class parties. A militant dharna was organised at Barvadih block office on July 12. But the BDO fled from his office and the Dy. Commissioner cancelled his already scheduled visit in view of the Party's dharna. The dharna continued for whole day and a memorandum was given to an official who also gave a written assurance that the BDO would come in person for the next programme. Then a people's court was summoned at Kutmu Chowk on July 19 where BDO was invited to answer all people's problems.

Nearly 3000 people participated at Kutmu Chowk dharna, but the BDO did not turn up. Instead an executive magistrate was sent by the district administration but the leaders demanded to summon the BDO. The people's court continued and participants described various incidents of loot and rampant corruption in schemes. It was decided to hold a mahadharna at the district headquarters on July 30. It was also decided by the people to boycott various programmes of the administration and the MLA, if held in the block. It was also resolved to hold people's courts at panchayats and to take action against the erring officials.

Seeing the massive participation of the people, the administration has now increased its 'initiative' at three levels; it has launched an anti-propaganda through its middlemen, some terror tactics are also being used, and some nominal reform measures are being taken up. But the people are now realising their actual strength and are prepared to take stronger action. We need to strengthen our organisational network in order to take this movement to greater heights.

A dharna was also held on July 18 at Manika Block. The BDO assured the protesters that the accounts of NREGS would be made public within four days and the anomalies in BPL lists would be corrected soon.

A similar protest was held in Koderma district where the block office was gheraoed by hundreds of people on July 19 against the loot of development funds, and people locked the offices preventing the entry of BDO and CO. The BDO then assured to hold proper social audit of NREGS and to include the names of the poor in BPL list.

Large number of people protested in Dhanwar block in Giridih district on July 17 on the same issues. Six agricultural workers also started a hunger strike which was joined by CPI(ML) leader Rajkumar Yadav. But the administration remained reluctant and on the third day the condition of a striker became serious. In view of this, hundreds of villagers gathered spontaneously and started a militant gherao of the BDO in his home. The people's anger ultimately forced the administration to send a doctor for medical examination and, later, the SDO came to address the protesters. The rural Development Secretary gave an assurance which led to calling off the protest after a 56-hours hunger strike.

Joint Women's Convention at Guwahati

A joint women's convention of AIPWA and other tribal women's organizations viz. KNCA (Karbi), MMK (Missing), Sonowal-Kachari and Tiwa was held at Guwahati's Tirthanath Sarma Sabhaghar on

14 July to chalk out immediate strategy for the struggle on various issues. The convention was attended by more than 300 women from different parts of the state and apart from constituents of 'Anti-repression Joint Women Action Committee' some other women activists and writers also took part. Comrade Meena Tiwari addressed the convention as the main speaker. She explained various aspects of the women's movement in current context and also described the AIPWA's ongoing activities and goals. She severely criticized UPA's anti-women policies, particularly its inaction in passing 33% reservation bill and called upon the women community to unite to fight against increasing repression on women. Dr. Anima Guha, a columnist and leader of a women's forum was the chief guest. She stressed on building a joint women's movement on various burning issues. Leaders of all the constituent organizations pressed for a joint movement on some common agenda. The representatives from House Hold Women Workers' Union, North East Social Research Centre and Guwahati University Women Research and Study Centre also spoke on the occasion.

Convention against Camp Coolie System in Coimbatore

In Coimbatore, Convention against Camp Coolie System was held on July 22. A batch of 50 workers of Pricol took up a door-to-door campaign in Saravanampatti, an area where there are many textile mills where camp coolies are involved in even 100% of production.

Workers of Pricol, LMW, VJ, along with persons from democratic and dalit organizations participated. The Convention was presided over by NK Natarajan, State General Secretary of AICCTU. S Kumarasami, CCM and all India President of AICCTU called upon the working class of Coimbatore to rise in struggle against the oppressive camp coolie system. It was decided to organize rally in Erode on July 16 on the demands including the abolition of camp coolie system, regularization of employment for those workers who have completed 240 days of work, Rs.6000 per month minimum wages for the textile workers, and immediate wage revision for the permanent textile workers.

Solidarity Forum launched in Poonamallee in Chennai

On July 22, a Solidarity Forum was launched in Poonamallee area by the initiative of Hyundai workers and with the encouragement from Tiruvotriyur Solidarity Forum. Vanguard workers of Hyundai, ADCO, Empee Distilleries, TI Diamond Chain, Eveready, Carborandum, MRF, Ashok Leyland, Aesthom, TSAL, Indotech Transformers, Hanil Automotive, HIS, Rane Valves, THT and Hyundai contract workers participated. AS Kumar, CPI(ML) State Committee member addressed the meeting.

Gang Rape by Police in the Name of Extremism

AIPWA Jharkhand has strongly protested against an incident of gang rape of a minor and brutal beating and torture of her family members by the police. This occurred on June 26 at Degagarha village of Bokaro district in the name of search operation for the Maoist extremists. An AIPWA investigation team has visited the affected village on July 12. The villagers told the team that they repeatedly face such tortures. Now the victim, Phoolmani, has recorded her statement before the DIG, yet no action has been taken against the police officials. AIPWA has decided to protest the governmental inaction and continuing repression of the villagers in the region.

AIALA Conference in Jahanabad

The Second AIALA Jahanabad district conference was held on 9 July in Jahanabad. The conference venue was named after the martyred Comrade Mahavir Azad. The conference was inaugurated by AIALA Bihar President Pawan Sharma. He called upon to make AIALA the most representative organisation of agricultural workers. The conference was also addressed by RYA General Secretary

Kamlesh Sharma, AIALA State Secretary Vidyanand Vikal, CPI(ML) District Secretary Ramadhar Singh, Kunti Devi and others. The Conference elected a 17-member committee with Satyendra Ravidas as President and Pradip Kumar as Secretary.

AIALA Leader Arrested in Allahabad

CPI(ML) leader and AIALA District Secretary Hansraj Kol was arrested without citing any reasons and kept in jail for ten days. He was framed under various criminal charges. A two-time Assembly candidate from the area, Comrade Hansraj is popular among the tribal and dalits and this was the main reason that he had to face police atrocities. A dharna was held at the district headquarters in protest and it was demanded to suspend the respective thana incharge and file a case on him under the SC Act. CPI(ML), AIALA and RYA leaders addressed the dharna. A memorandum was sent to the Governor with these demands.

Seminar to Commemorate 1857

A seminar was organised on 15 July in Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan to commemorate the 150th anniversary of 1857. The topic of the seminar was '1857 and the Present Day India'. This was addressed by Md. Salim, RYA National President, as the main speaker. Freedom fighter Vidyadhar Kulhari, CPI(ML) Rajasthan Secretary Mahendra Singh, Phoolchand Dheva and a number of intellectuals also addressed the seminar.

Kidnapped from Bengal and Thrown into the Flesh Trade

AIPWA Bihar unit has demanded action against police and other persons who brought a girl Dipali Mazumdar to Bihar and threw her into the heinous flesh trade. AIPWA received a letter from Dipali requesting her rescue. She once escaped her captors and went to a police station in Patna, but there too she was raped by the police and now she is, as per the police version, untraceable. AIPWA leader Mina Tiwari has alleged that the police are protecting the criminals and demanded strong action against the culprits as well as her rescue and rehabilitation.

P.S.

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