

# **The One Day All-India Strike on 2 September, Modi's reforms, the tasks of revolutionaries**

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**The following essays appeared in the August 2015 issue of *Radical*, the Bengali paper of Radical Socialist. They articulate our stand on the demands, the issues over which the fight back is occurring, the limitations of reformism and the tasks of revolutionaries.**

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## **Make the One Day All-India Strike on 2 September a Huge Success**

With the electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which got a majority in the lower house of Parliament all by itself, a deeply right wing government is well-settled in power. A little over one year after they have come to power, this government is going to engage in its first test of strength with the working class. We have long ago characterised the BJP, and standing behind it, the RSS, as a fascist force. But this does not mean that the day after they took power a Hitler-regime was imposed in India. But the chipping away at democracy continues daily. Daily, also proceed two efforts, each in its own way, but both with consistent government support – one is the imposition of Hindutva, and the other the politics of imposing the interests of capital. But the class struggle dimension is not often publicly recognised, because there the bourgeois liberals and the fascists are in essential agreement. So the common area between liberals (who might claim to oppose Hindutva) and the fascists is that in the name of “reforms” for “development”, profit rate must be increased. That is why, we need to discuss closely the one day All-India Strike called by the trade unions for 2 September, 2015.

## **Why the Strike?**

On 26 May 2015, at a National Convention held in the Mavlankar Auditorium at the call of 11 Central Trade Unions as well as 50 national federations of Central Government employees, a one day strike call was issued in order to resist the anti worker-peasant, pro-bosses’ profit policies of the one year old BJP government.

The trade unions had presented a Ten point charter of demands at the time of the UPA government. All-India strikes have occurred thrice, in 2010, 2012 and 2013 over those demands.[1] Just as the UPA government chose to remain silent over those demands, so has today’s national Democratic Alliance government under Modi decided to ignore the demands. Both NDA and UPA have severe objections to implementing any of the recommendations of the Indian Labour Conferences.

Accordingly, we first need to look at the charters of demands, produced by the Central Trade Unions

as well as the Central Government Employees Federations. Whenever workers call strikes, the bourgeois newspapers, the television channels, all raise a tremendous hue and cry – these people are damaging the economy. Attempts are made to stoke up conflicts between the poorest paid workers and those slightly better off. So we begin by closely examining the demands.

### **The 12 point Charter of the Central Trade Unions:**

1. Urgent measures for containing price-rise through universalisation of public distribution system and banning speculative trade in commodity market.
2. Containing unemployment through concrete measures for employment generation.
3. Strict enforcement of all basic labour laws without any exception or exemption and stringent punitive measure for violation for labour laws.
4. Universal social security cover for all workers.
5. Minimum wages of not less than Rs. 15,000/- per month with provisions of indexation.
6. Assured enhanced pension not less than Rs. 3000/- P.M. for the entire working population.
7. Stoppage of disinvestment in Central/State PSUs.
8. Stoppage of contractisation in permanent perennial work and payment of same wage and benefits for contract workers as regular workers for same and similar work.
9. Removal of all ceilings on payment and eligibility of bonus, provident fund; increase the quantum of gratuity.
10. Compulsory registration of trade unions within a period of 45 days from the date of submitting applications; and immediate ratification of ILO Convention C 87 and C 98.
11. Against Labour Law Amendments
12. Against FDI in Railways, Insurance and Defence.

### **The 10 Point Demands of the Central Government Employees Federations:**

1. Effect wage revision of the Central Government Employees from 01.01.2014 accepting memorandum of the staff side JCM; ensure 5-year wage revision in future; grant interim relief and merger of 100% of DA; Include Gramin Dak Sevaks within the ambit of 7<sup>th</sup> CPC. Settle all anomalies of 6<sup>th</sup> CPC.
2. No Privatisation, PPP or FDI in Railways, Defence Establishment and no corporatization of Postal services.
3. No ban on creation of new posts. Fill up all vacant posts.
4. Scrap PFRDA Act and re-introduce the defined benefit statutory pension scheme.
5. No outsourcing, contractisation, privatization of governmental functions; withdraw the proposed move to close down the printing presses, the publications, form stores and stationery departments and medical stores Depots; regularize the existing daily-rated/casual and contract workers and absorption of trained apprentices.

6. Revive the JCM functioning at all level as an effective negotiating forum for settlement of the demands of the Central Government Employees.
7. Remove arbitrary ceiling on compassionate appointment.
8. No labour reforms which are inimical to the interest of the workers.
9. Remove the ceiling on payment on bonus
10. Ensure five promotions in the serve career.

Some general issues can be understood from these demands. Generally, of course, unions raise demands in the interests of their members. But some of these demands are demands that go beyond union members to serve the interests of the entire working class, indeed of all toiling people.

### **The Public Distribution System:**

The governmental logic behind gutting the countrywide PDS has been, why should the government pay “subsidies “ to those who have the ability to pay? By this “logic”, a division has been created between those who are ostensibly “above’ the poverty level and those who are below it. A huge part of the population has been removed from the rationing system. We say – the government must increase its revenues by increasing direct taxes on the rich, on companies, etc. Using that wealth, every human being living in India must be given rice, wheat, pulses, soap, and other essential goods through the rationing network. We feel that if Mukesh or Anil Ambani [2] are willing to stand in queue for the ration or to eat the quality of rice obtained from the ration shop, let them also get their ration cards and draw their rations. The “subsidy” the government would have to bear in order to set up a universal rationing system, will have to be funded by hiking taxes on the Ambanis, the Adanis, the Tatas and the Birlas.

### **Job creation:**

Only the state can afford to create employment opportunities without everyday looking at the rate of profit. So it is through public investments that employment can be generated and the problem of unemployment tackled. Not only the second demand of the Central trade unions, but also other demands actually have that thrust.

### **Minimum wages Rs 15000, Minimum pension Rs. 3000:**

Over this demand, a fraud is being perpetrated to divide workers and toiling people generally. The argument is, if wages are raised, the cost of living will also go up. If the wages of rural workers is raised, then prices of cereals, lentils, vegetables will go up immediately. Services will cost more. Domestic workers (still called servants in most Indian languages) wages will rise [this is a threat directed at the better paid wage earners, who hire part time or even full time domestic help]. The hike in the wages of transport workers will also mean a hike in transport costs.

First of all, everyone has the right to live a decent life. So regardless of exactly what the impact will be on workers with somewhat higher incomes, the demand for minimum wages and pensions for all is the most socially just demand that one can think of.

Secondly, these two demands are not isolated ones. There is a full charter of demands taking into consideration all working people. The demands also include demands for wage rise of workers and employees of the organised sector. What is ignored, when the better paid workers are instigated against this demand, is the reality that in today’s India, in fact less than 10 per cent of the workers

are organised. These are indeed core demands that will have an effect on all the demands of the workers. In today's working class movement in India, the importance of these demands simply cannot be overstressed.

Further, it must be realised that a large part of this unorganised labour force, workers in construction industry, domestic workers, or for that matter workers under contract in numerous industries, do not work under the same owner all their lives. So the central thrust of these demands is not directed to the individual capitalist or boss, as it is directed to the state as the collective voice of the ruling class. It is for the state, rather than any private employer, to guarantee a monthly pension to all workers after they retire.

### **Globalization and Its Impact:**

Next come the demands related to globalization and the attacks on working class due to globalization:

These include an opposition to the reduction of permanent jobs and the increase of contractisation. It is worth looking at how massively this has grown in different sectors. Through the introduction of the so-called PPP model, many jobs even in core government sectors have been farmed out to private companies, especially contractors. Vital aspects of the economy are affected. As a result, private profits grow while losses are off-loaded on the gutted, exhausted public sector. At the same time, through contractisation and privatisation, an increasing number of workers are pushed into precarious conditions of existence. For example, in the educational sector, even in higher education (general colleges, universities, and technical colleges), teachers hired through short term contracts (at most one year) now amount to 40 per cent of all teachers. An increasing part of the other staff (clerical, technical, security, etc) are also being turned into contract, often short term staff.

Finally there are basic democratic rights issues, notably the demand that the right to form trade unions be accepted rather than hampered, and that the ILO conventions 87, 98 and 104 be recognised and implemented. Through these conventions, India must promulgate laws that would make impossible the current scenario, where union-busting laws like the Essential Services Maintenance Act are passed and implemented. Government employees must also be given the full and unhampered right to form unions and the right to strike.

Along with these, there are demands relating to already implemented as well as proposed labour law reforms, but so important are these, that they merit a separate discussion. Before that, however, one core issue must be addressed. In 1991, when P.V. Narasima Rao was the Prime Minister and Manmohan Singh the Finance Minister, India embarked on an open, full-fledged policy of economic liberalisation, under the heading of globalization. Ever since then, we have been given certain promises. At the heart of all those promises was one central argument – that globalization, or the reduction of state control and the increase of economic liberalism, would result in an immense development with a trickle-down effect, so that the poor too would benefit. After a quarter century, the time has surely come to take stock of the concrete effects.

After between ten and fifteen years of the new policies, i.e., in 2001-05, according to the estimates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the average Gross Domestic Product rose by 6.5 percent per year. But wages rose by 2.6%. In 2006 wages rose by merely 0.4 per cent, and in 2007 they actually declined by 0.6 per cent. But even the word wages can be confusing, when the division is such that the wages of bureaucrats, managers, are piled together with those of truck drivers, brick layers, or domestic help. A few other components help us to understand the distribution of income (wages, profit, all) better.

1990-912010-11

Private Cars1,80,00029,00,000

People travelling by planes89,00,0005,70,00,000

Cabinet Secretary's wages30,00090,000

(Monthly, in INR)

Annual salary of the Tata Steel

Managing Director (in INR)3.78 million41 million

In other words, "development" has indeed occurred. It has made the Indian wealthy more wealthy. It has enabled a few within the Indian capitalist class to break through right to the top of the big capitalists globally, and it has meant prosperity for the top 10 to 15 per cent of the Indian population. The clearest gross estimate of how globalization has meant gains, and for whom, come from two sources. We can look at the Income Tax and property tax records; and we can look at the reports on worldwide wealth, including the aforementioned Forbes list of the rich.

These show that in 2009, the top 100 Indian rich had total wealth amounting to 276 billion US dollars. In the same year, the top 100 Chinese rich had wealth amounting to 170 billion US dollars. Yet if the GDP is computed taking into account relative purchasing power, (GDP- PPP) then the Indian GDP was less than half that of its Chinese counterpart. In other words, despite the rhetoric of India being a democracy and how that makes it difficult to garner profits while in China supposedly the dictatorial rule makes everything easier, it is in India that the wealthy have a tighter grip over the distribution of wealth.

So the strike is not because of any shady and manipulative attitude of the union leaders, as bourgeois propaganda tells us all the time. Nor is there any adventurism. What exists is a deep anger among the toiling people, with which has come together in recent times a determination to fight against the proposals for labour law reform by the Modi Government.

## **Radical Socialist**

*Notes*

[1]. See

<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/statement-radical-socialist/228-radical-socialist-statement-on-the-7-september-all-india-strike> ;

<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/statement-radical-socialist/455-against-the-rule-of-capital-for-the-general-strike> ; <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2524> ; and

<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/national-situation/525-greater-than-the-might-of-armies-the-general-strike-of-20-21-february-2013> for Radical Socialist statements and assessments.

[2]. Mukesh Ambani is possibly India's richest individual. Forbes magazine puts his net real worth at US\$18.9 billion on 26/8/2015 (<http://www.forbes.com/profile/mukesh-ambani/> ). His younger brother Anil has been identified by Forbes as India's 19<sup>th</sup> richest man, with US\$2.5 billion on the same day. (<http://www.forbes.com/profile/anil-ambani/> ) (both last accessed on 26/8/2015).

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## **Labour Law Reforms, Indian Capitalism and the Modi Government**

*This is the second article on the coming all India strike. Here we take a look at the kind of reforms Modi wishes to push through.*

From the beginning of the era of globalization in India, one routine yell of the capitalist class has been that the Indian labour laws are archaic, and pose the greatest hindrance to progress. In reality labour laws are very often ignored or flouted. There are so many ways to avoid labour laws in the unorganised sector, in the SEZs, etc. But capital must forever seek to increase its profit rate. So the few laws that protect a few of the workers, they too must be brought under attack. The word “reform” is a code word for an all out offensive.

The national convention called by the Central Trade Unions, a group of mostly moderate organisations, mostly led by either reformist left parties or affiliated to bourgeois parties, and therefore not at all inclined to make excessively radical claims, adopted a declaration that said, in part:

*“The Governments’ aim in aggressively pushing through sweeping changes in labour-laws is nothing but to push out overwhelming majority of workers out of the coverage of all labour laws and to drastically curb the trade union rights. The CTUs had besides other issues raised the issue of strict enforcement of labour laws and universal social security but this Govt. is doing away with all rights-components in all the labour laws aiming at creating conditions of bonded labour in all the workplaces. EPF and ESI schemes are proposed to be made optional which is also aimed at demolishing the PF and ESI schemes dismantling the basic social security structures available to the organized sector. And for the vast unorganized sector workers, old schemes are being repackaged and renamed, without providing for funds and implementation-machinery/network with a view to befool the people.”[1]*

So who is right — the bosses and the government, with their array of experts, development economists, management gurus, or the workers and their unions? Before and during every strike, dozens of newspapers and dozens of television channels produce innumerable experts, who explain in unctuous tones that getting rid of the archaic laws will benefit not just the bosses, but the entire economy, including the workers. The archaic labour laws, we are told, act as shackles on the feet of the Indian economy.

So what are the laws which must be reformed? The list includes the Factories Act (1948), the Apprentices Act (1961), and the Labour Laws Act (1988).

It is true, that since independence, or even since 1991, labour laws have not changed much. The basic idea behind some of these laws is, that in any non-agricultural work, if there are ten or more workers in a workplace (when it has electricity) and twenty or more (when it does not have electrical power), then there will be governmental regulation of the rules of work. This sector is called the “organised sector”.

Establishments under the organised sector usually have to register themselves under the Factories Act. This means, in theory they are bound to allow government inspectors to enter their premises at any time. But even so, some 90 per cent of India’s labour force, belonging to the unorganised sector,

are currently out of these rules. So such things as rules about working hours, overtime pay, rights of women workers, all these are restricted to a less than ten percent fragment of the working class. There was a formal claim behind the making of this structure in the colonial and immediate post-independence period, namely, as the nation developed, as modernisation proceeded, the organised sector would grow and more and more workers would come under protection. In reality, from the 1970s, development has taken a different path.

Nevertheless, the existence of these laws does have some consequence. Even if, today only ten percent of the working class is protected by these laws, the rights they enjoy appear as a forward looking goal to the vast majority. In the same way, we can refer to the regular announcement of pay revisions, of payment of Dearness Allowances, etc. The bourgeoisie, its paid media hacks, its paid ideologues who are called economists, all attack these workers/employees. They allege that these workers are privileged. It is routinely spread in newspapers, in fiction, in organised rumours, that these are people who get fat salaries without doing any work. Had the state sector not existed, it is then asserted, they would not have these privileges.

There is of course some truth in these fables. Take the public sector and the private sector buses in Kolkata. Private sector bus drivers and conductors usually get a share of the money taken in, not a salary. As a result, they work long hours. Public sector buses are kept in depots, where there is a full time maintenance staff. Private sector bus drivers and helpers have to look after their own buses. So owners make big profits. And as long as certain groups of workers go on getting definite pay scales, periodic revision of the pay scales, dearness allowance, a number of guaranteed promotions during one's working life, some (even if limited) benefits for women workers, such as paid maternity leave or child care leave, these persist in becoming benchmarks for other workers, in formulating their demands and in fighting for them. This was why, even as Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi had objected to the formation of the Seventh Pay Commission (his view had been echoed by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee).

So the law is important because it creates a somewhat better space where the workers can fight. To ignore that is not a useful political stance. Year after year, big capital has been demanding that the laws restraining them must go. Some of the Acts they want removed or modified are the Industrial Disputes Act and the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act. The IDA says, in any plant having 100 or more workers, before sackings or closure, the owners must seek government permission. The second Act restricts the use of contract labourers in existing industries. Modi wants the number of workers needed to bring a factory under the Factories Act to be increased from 10 to 40. It is to be noted that in today's world of lean production, a factory employing 40 workers and using robots multiplying the work of those 40 tenfold or more, is actually quite a considerable factory. The BJP-led Rajasthan government has already taken some steps. In the Contract Labour Act, where the references had been to twenty workers or more, they have increased it to fifty or more. In the case of the IDA, they have announced that permission of the state government need not be sought regarding sackings unless the size of the workforce is 300 or more. When the workers are taken in as apprentices, all restrictions on sackings have been lifted. They have also made getting recognitions for unions more difficult. In addition, Modi has proposed making firings easier, imposing up to Rs. 50,000 fines plus jail terms for "illegal" strikes; and the already taken action - making child labour legal.

### **Child Labour:**

On one hand, much din is being made and much data is being fudged in order to claim that poverty is going down in India. On the other hand, instead of taking social welfare measures directed at poor children, child labour has been legalised. In an interview, Gautam Mody, General Secretary of the New Trade Union Initiative, explained in an interview, that officially the position is, children may be

made to work outside school hours. But if children have to attend school, and then perform labour outside school hours, then where does childhood go? What does education mean? Secondly it has been said that the labour of members of the family can be used when using child labour, But if it is not clarified what family means, this can be a real problem. Using the concept of “joint family”, children of poorer kin can be exploited. Moreover, as child labour becomes widespread, and extremely low wages are paid to these children, that will have the effect of dragging down the overall wage level, certainly in a number of sectors. So the “reform” of child labour law has the clear intention of lowering wages and producing larger numbers of low paid unskilled labourers.

### **Contract Labour:**

The bulk of the people in the labour market of India are short term contract labourers. At present, 85 per cent of the enterprises engaged in industrial production work with less than 50 workers. 58 per cent of factories have less than 30 workers. Even in the organised sector about 80 per cent of workers have no formal, written agreement. Or they have contracts for less than one year. A huge part of these workers work under sub-contractors. Even in government jobs, or in jobs where the salary ultimately comes from the government, thirty per cent are currently working with short term contracts. But out of the 36 million contract workers now in existence in India, hardly 6 million even now come under the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act of 1970. Modi’s proposed reform wants to take all workers in all factories hiring 50 or fewer workers outside the purview of this Act. In that case, of course, far more workers would come under the tender mercies of the contractors.

### **Small Industrial Enterprises:**

By the Small Factories (Regulation of Employment and Condition of Services) the definition of a small factory has been sought to be changed to all factories employing fewer than 40 workers. In the name of simplifying the laws, all such factories are thus going to be taken out of the protection of 14 labour protection laws. It is to be remembered that post-1991, most of the new jobs created fall in the unorganised sector. The proposed reforms will immensely strengthen the owners in that huge sector.

### **Factory Inspection and “Self-Certification”:**

Industrialists and bankers often use the term “inspection raj”. Inspections can be of different types. But the truth is, India never had much of a decent labour inspectorate. In 2012, in order to see whether the Minimum Wages Act was being properly implemented, there were a princely total of 3171 inspectors for about 7.7 million enterprises. It is evident that there was not much real inspection. According to official records, in 1986 there had been actual inspections of 63 per cent of all factories. By 2008 this had come down to 17.88 per cent.

Even 31 years after the Bhopal disaster, awareness of industrial safety is extremely poor. In the case over Vadodara’s Hema Chemicals, it was the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee that found a mountain of 77,000 tonnes of toxic waste material created by the owner.[2] Yet, in this situation, instead of looking at the problems workers face, the Modi government has, in a particularly shameless manner, called for “self-certification”. The owner will annually certify that the company is following all laws. There may be occasional (not annual) inspections. If that ever results in proving that the owner had lied, then they might be handed stiff penalties. As had happened to Union Carbide after Bhopal, one supposes!! In reality, everything will be imperilled as a result of this: workplace safety, drinking water, eight hour working day, adequate toilet facilities, extra pay for overtime work, leave with full pay – every right won over a century.



## **The Gujarat Model:**

Before the elections of 2014, we were repeatedly told, that the road to the country's development was being shown by the Gujarat Model. So what does development mean in that case? The Gujarat Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Act, 2004 and the Gujarat Special Economic Zones Acts have ensured that most of Gujarat's industries fell outside the control of India's labour laws, or most of them. But though the SEZs were outside the control of national labour laws, they did not generate vast numbers of jobs. What happened was, the rate of profit and the total profits of the bosses multiplied manifold. Secondly, the SEZs were built by occupying large tracts of land. At the all India level, that model has already led to tremendous uproar. Seizing the opportunity, even the bourgeois opposition parties have started making trouble over this issue in Parliament.

But what, overall, was the Gujarat Model? In 2012, an independent trade union named the Jyoti Karmachari Mandal filed a query under the Right to Information Act concerning the Gujarat Government's Swami Vivekanand Youth Employment Week. The Gujarat Government had claimed that 65,000 young women and men had been given jobs through Rozgar Melas (Employment Fairs). But a district-wise break up obtained through RTIs showed a total of not more than 51,587. Of these, 11,172 were apprentices, so there is no guarantee they would retain their jobs after the apprenticeship period was over. That leaves 40,415. But the responses to the RTI provided only 32,372 names and addresses. Moreover, it was learnt from the RTIs that not one person had been given appointment letters. What was done, it emerged from the data provided by the RTIs, was that 18.7 million rupees were spent out of public funds (for the security of the ministers who went round these fairs handing over fake documents called "Employment letters" (bad in law) to the youth, and for setting up stalls, putting advertisements etc. The result was the hiring of low paid workers - mostly for the private sector. So this is the model that Modi wants to present to the whole of India. The rulers will no doubt be happy.

## **Environment and Workers' Health Issues:**

Another important issue connected to this is the health issue. In 1960, industry in Gujarat was restricted to four cities - Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Surat and Rajkot. The discovery of mineral oil and natural gas changed the picture. Currently 51 per cent of India's chemical industry production comes from this one province. Twenty per cent of Gujarat's total industrial activity is over this one industry. Yet even so many years after Bhopal, the state government is not worried about the health of workers in this industry. In 2009, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and IIT Delhi joined hands to develop a new system of pollution measurement. This index, the Comprehensive Environmental Pollution Index, in 2009 Ankleswar in Gujarat with CEPI 88.50 was India's most highly polluted place. In 2011 and 2013 this dubious honour went to Vapi in Gujarat, with CEPI 85.31. In 2013, out of the 30,310 factories registered under the Factories Act in Gujarat, 4,559 were identified as dangerous chemical works. Yet the Gujarat government has never developed any plan to tackle dangerous chemicals. As the first step to transferring the Gujarat model across India, the Modi government has already diluted many of the environment protection rules to facilitate setting up highly profitable industries.

So the words Labour Law Reform, do not imply protecting, far less improving, the health, the wages, and working environment of workers. Their meaning should now be clear: destruction of trade unions, intensification of exploitation, reduction of wages, increasing child labour. That is why, the strike of 2 September is such a vital action.

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## **The Political Significance of the All India Strike and the Revolutionary Movement in India**

Between 1991 and 2015 there is a vast gap. The mainstream left parties and the Central Trade Unions and other mass organisations affiliated to them had at that time a much tighter grip on the working people. But they were becoming utterly clueless in a world where the Tien-an Men Square massacre had occurred, where the East European bureaucratized workers states had taken the path of capitalist restoration and even the Soviet Union was about to collapse. The Stalinist ideology and politics most of these parties followed was in its death throes. On the other side was the decades long class collaborationist practice in independent India. This was the time when the BJP had begun its ascent, over the campaign to destroy the Babri Masjid. As a result, in the belief that resisting fascism demanded an alliance with the so-called democratic sections or the anti-fascist sections of the bourgeoisie, they were not willing to take up the fight against the first round of neo-liberal offensive seriously. Indeed, frozen in their doctrinaire position that India needed a two-stage revolution and that globalization was the imposition of imperialism, they did not even realise how much the new policies were brought about in the interests of the Indian ruling class itself. The capitalists globally made no such mistake. A World Bank report at that time said that unlike in many other countries, in India they did not meet with hostility from government bureaucrats and banks when they put forward their Structural Adjustment proposals, but were instead met with similar proposals from the opposite side. This simply means that the Indian capitalist class had decided that further capital accumulation needed a great deal of economic liberalisation. Those leftists who were busy hunting for the “progressive national bourgeoisie: were the ones who did not understand this.

And of course, from 1992, what took priority was the “anti-communal, secular united front”. In practice, this meant tolerating Narasimha Rao’s neoliberal and soft Hindutva tinged government as the “lesser evil”. This was the first step in a series of disastrous actions. They followed this with support to the United Front, a government propped up by the Left and with the CPI actually participating in the cabinet. But the economic policy of this government was crafted by P. Chidambaram. His budget was hailed by Indian big capital as a “dream budget”. It was frustration at the failure of the United Front no less than anger at the Congress that resulted in the Vajpayee -led National Democratic Front government coming to power. The policies of the NDA government resulted in tremendous popular disaffection, and this resulted in the electoral results of 2004, when the Left won its greatest ever share of votes and seats. The four left parties polled nearly 9 per cent of the votes and obtained 62 seats. But they then declared support, once again, to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, and broke only four and a half years later over the nuclear treaty with the USA. Neither was that a principled anti-nuclear stand, since the objection had more to do with : “why the USA?”; nor did they tack opposition to the economic policies of the government. Indeed, in places like West Bengal, where they were in power, they followed the same neo-liberal policies.

There are important changes today. On one hand, in the Indian parliament, the left parties have far less representation than they had in the past. Within the working class movement too, their ideological as well as organisational control has gone down. Today, the RSS dominated BMS is the biggest union, followed by the Congress led INTUC. Meanwhile an entire generation of working class has grown up. Workers are losing jobs. Masses of workers are finding permanent jobs being converted to contract jobs. As a result, tremendous pressure is coming up from within the working class, demanding resistance. Between 1991 and 2006, in the nationalised sector, there has been a

loss of 8,70,000 jobs. Between 1991 and 2013 there have taken place sixteen one or two day all India strikes. The ones in 2010, 2012 and 2013 were big events in the second phase of the UPA government.

Pressure is welling up for struggle, and for unity to wage struggle. The long struggle in the tea gardens was made possible by the unity. In jute mills, in the hosiery industry, there have emerged common platforms. That the INTUC and the BMS also had to go against their own governments is an indication of the working class pressure. [On 30 August the BMS finally withdrew its support for the strike, making it easier for the government to apply the harsh anti-labour, anti-strike measures it has been threatening to use in case the strike does take place.]

But there are many revolutionary organisations and their cadres who will say that the limitations of these struggles have been repeatedly shown up. This is where we need to test, what is a real revolutionary strategy, what are revolutionary tactics. And who are the people who only shuttle between reformism and sectarianism. For, when the working class movement has been taking severe beatings, and is on the backfoot, when the revolutionary organisation/s and movement is weak, to expect in such a situation that the bulk of the trade union movement will be revolutionary is to indulge in utopian day-dreaming. And if revolutionaries, in the name of retaining their “purity”, refuse to get involved in serious struggles, if they think that their task is to stand by the roadside passing out leaflets criticising the reformist lines of the Central Trade Unions, then history will move forward, leaving them behind.

We have said, in the first article, that the working class is contesting a government holding the banner of fascism. This is not an easy struggle. But this struggle cannot but begin through organisations that the working class is familiar with, organisations that they see (even if erroneously) as organisations standing by them for their struggles. And the enemy is not one company, one enterprise, but the entire ruling class and its political organisation – the state. A fitting response can be given only at the all India level, hence the oft used critical comment – “only a one day strike is not enough”, is only a partial truth.

If revolutionaries think their task is to ultimately win over the majority of the working class to their perspectives, then they have to act as organisers of working class struggles in a big way. Formally everyone or most will agree with this. But in practice, as the struggle in the tea gardens showed, the task is difficult. An immense amount of energy must be spent in seriously building trade unions and going to a militant struggle. And then, at need, one has to call traitors as traitors. This is what happened in the tea gardens. But only when the revolutionaries were fully involved in building the struggle will they gain a hearing if they call the reformists by their proper names. Only through such struggles can they successfully build, not miniature pocket unions led by a “revolutionary party”, but democratic working class unions.

What the one day all India strike can do is raise the crucial issues before the workers of the country. The added duty of revolutionaries is to raise the long term issues within every partial struggle. For example, we can say, in the case of the tea garden struggles, which ended with the shameful capitulation of the major unions to the dictations of the owners dressed up as government announcement at the tripartite discussions, it is not enough to castigate the capitulations. It is also necessary to hold up the alternative. In the same way, we can say that when the All India Federation of University and College Teachers’ Organisations (AIFUCTO) or the West Bengal College and University Teachers’ Association demand pay rise or Dearness Allowance and yet do not mobilise seriously, our task is to get in there, demand greater mobilisations, and insist that the rights of the masses of part time teachers be highlighted.

The most vital task in today’s situation is to organise the vast masses of unorganised workers. To do

this, revolutionaries must act both inside and outside unions. The limitation of any trade union is, it must begin by thinking of its own membership. But that action, however natural and even legitimate, means the exclusion of a lot of others. That is why, the traditional unions in particular, routine-bound, often bureaucratised, paid so little attention to the rights of the unorganised. But if one excludes the unorganised contract workers, then very few major struggles can achieve victory today. Bank employees understood this well enough, as banks constantly improved the ATMs so that a great many functions can be carried out through them. As this happened, the effectivity of bank strikes were blunted when ATMs remained open. So an intelligent union membership will, in its own interest, try to organise the unorganised in their own sector. But when it comes to the country as a whole, this is clearly the task of a political leadership. It is the revolutionary activists and their organisations, working hand in hand with the newer, more militant trade unions, who will begin to create the structures of alternative organisations. They have to deepen the campaigns over the strike, linking the local with the all-India demands and issues.

Over a century back, Rosa Luxemburg explained that the Mass Strike is not an isolated incident but the central aspect of the class struggle of a whole period. She saw a one day token strike as less important. More important was the blending of political and economic struggles, each inspiring the other.

Only in a revolutionary period, when the foundations and walls of class society tremble, do the vast masses of workers, including those who till the other day had been inactive, get into the thick of battles. We are certainly not in such a situation today. But nor are we in the situation of 1991, when gloom and doom had influenced the leaders of unions and parties. A considerable part of the working class has shown, through local battles as well as through participation in previous all India strikes, that they are nearing the boiling point and want to fight back. Our task is to build a revolutionary proletarian alternative. And that can only be done if we stay at our posts, and combine the struggles over local issues with the all India demands. When we take the line of building small "ideal" unions of usually miniscule size, or when we stand outside the real struggles, handing out leaflets to militant workers explaining why their leaders are traitors and agents of the ruling class, we are seen rightly by the workers as sectarians who are not involved in their real struggles.

But another temptation before revolutionaries is to apply the united front tactic badly or in a wrong way. Thus, today, the CPI(M) and its mass fronts, including the CITU, are taking questionable political positions. They have routinely poured cold water when workers have become militant. Their politics even now is one where they are desperately looking for an alliance with the Congress and other bourgeois parties in order to block the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal and the BJP at the all India level. There has been no serious self criticism by the CPI(M) of its support to neoliberalism when in power. Goutam Deb's comments, CPI intellectual Debes Roy's article in Ei Samay, the Bangla paper of the Times of India group, all attest to their desperation to get back some share of governmental power, with no regard to any kind of left principle. At this juncture, it is one thing to fight together with the CITU on a certain day or for a certain demand. It is a very different thing when we turn that into an alliance with the CITU, or the CPI(M), as some forces on the radical left are doing. That enables the CPI(M) to present itself under "left" cover, that confuses militant cadres, and that is not really necessary to gain the hearing of the CPI(M) ranks. Building independent movements, but not as sects outside the working class, but rather as builders of working class organisations and struggles is what is needed. Once we do so, the question of united action with reformist unions will come up. In any case whenever we are in big unions we work with cadres of those parties. It is this line, where we maintain our independence, but still work with the reformists, that needs to be worked out consistently in practice. This is the task of the revolutionary left for the 2<sup>nd</sup> September strike, not one of either finding joys that one of "our" leaders is able to rub shoulders with big union leaders in a central rally, nor in the joy of sectarianism.

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**P.S.**

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