

Talks to avert all-India strike fail

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A last-minute, allegedly perfunctory attempt by the NDA government to dissuade the central trade unions from going ahead with countrywide protests against proposed labour reforms and the privatisation of PSUs failed on Thursday.

With the talks falling through, the RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) will hold protests in front of every district headquarters and industrial hub on Friday.

Other trade unions, including Congress labour arm Intuc, CPM-backed Citu and the CPI-aligned Aituc, will hold an all-India strike on January 8 (Wednesday), supported by farmers' organisations affiliated to the Left.

After the protest plans were announced, the Union labour ministry reached out to the 12 central trade unions by calling them to a meeting with minister Santosh Gangwar on Thursday.

Union leaders and some government officials said Gangwar read out an opening statement, emphasising that the government was implementing measures in the interests of workers. The minister described the four proposed labour codes as initiatives to protect workers.

"There was no discussion. The minister merely read out a statement. The government gave no assurance on our demands. Our protests will continue," said BMS general secretary Virjesh Upadhyay.

Citu general secretary Tapen Sen said the labour minister had merely fulfilled a formality in reaching out to the trade unions.

"There was no sincere effort to reach out to the trade unions. The minister was fulfilling some formality. After he read out his statement, the trade unions rejected his claims and the meeting was over. He did not try to engage with us," Sen said.

A government official, however, said Gangwar had explained the Centre's point of view and requested the trade unions to withdraw their protests.

The trade unions are agitating against "major changes" being pushed through the proposed labour codes. They are also against the privatisation of PSUs, foreign direct investment and increasing contractual and fixed-term appointments in the government sector, which is seen as weakening the position of workers.

The unions are demanding universal social security cover for all workers, a minimum wage of not less than Rs 21,000 a month with provisions of indexation, assured enhanced pension not less than Rs 10,000 a month for the entire working population and compulsory registration of trade unions.

The BMS has specifically demanded that the annual income-tax threshold be raised from Rs 5 lakh to Rs 8 lakh. Intuc and the Left-leaning trade unions have also demanded the withdrawal of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and assurance from the government that there would be no nationwide NRC and NPR.

The CAA, NRC and the NPR were not raised at Thursday's meeting since they do not pertain to the labour ministry.

The government recently introduced four labour codes subsuming 44 existing labour laws. The first one of the series, the Code on Wages, has already been passed by Parliament. Bills pertaining to the three other codes — the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Condition, Code on Industrial Relations and the Code on Social Security — have been introduced in Parliament.

The bill on the Code on Industrial Relations has a provision that the unions believe robs workers of their right to go on strike. The bill says no employee in any industrial establishment shall strike work without giving to the employer a notice and waiting for the verdict of a conciliation officer.

The trade unions fear that industrial units would deliberately delay the conciliation process to foil strikes.

Another contentious provision relates to allowing industrial establishments with over 100 employees to retrench employees without seeking the government's approval. Currently, industrial units with up to 100 employees do not need such sanction. The bill says the state governments can issue orders to fix ceilings.

Aituc general secretary Amarjeet Kaur said the provisions in the Code on Industrial Relations bill sought to weaken the labour unions and their power for collective bargaining during disputes.

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