

A Major Victory for Workers' Rights Won by the Women-Workers of Garment Industry!

Whatever might have been the history of its militancy and achievements in the pre-era of the capitalist neo-liberal economic reforms of the traditional and established trade union movement in our country, in the post-reform era of 25 years, it had lost its sheen and its activity has almost disappeared. Many weaknesses-political understanding as well organizational, infested the movement rendering it almost incapable of delivering the goods. Almost a desperate situation has pervaded the entire worker's movement in to despondency, leaving the leadership of traditional and established trade unions in to complacency.

On the other hand the ruthless, inhuman exploitation of the labour power of the workers has increased in to boundless proportions, with the active connivance of the ruling governments. Particularly in the name of drawing women in to economic activity and their empowerment millions of women are drawn in to industrial activity as workers, who can easily be exploited cheaply of their labour under inhuman living and working conditions, forcing them in to unbearable social and living conditions.

The semi-feudal nature of our system with its strong established patriarchal culture, practices and traditions has bound the women workers to the big-capital and its machinations as the bonded labourers of the modern type, disallowing them to organize through family and societal censures.

The neo-liberal capitalist policies have skillfully used the systematic social restrictions and control on the women to its advantage in exploiting their labour inhumanly in its pursuit of gaining super profits, without bringing out any progressive change in the feudal societal relations and practices.

This worst form of exploitation is glaringly apparently visible in the export oriented garment industry of our country, as is apparent in the garment industry of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Cambodia. The myth of the economical development and the so-called corporate ethical practices and management besides inclusion and empowerment of women through reforms can easily be blown up, when the actual unfair practices of exploitation of the labour power in the export oriented garment industry that manufacture for world-class brand earning them super-profit is observed in practice.

The women workers in these garment sector units are almost treated as bonded labour in the factories. They are not provided proper rest-rooms, places to sit, a space to relax in, lunch time, freedom from sexual harassment and verbal abuse-the very basic rights of women workers-are refused to them. Heavy work load, long hours of work including forced overtime work, disallowing them to go free beyond the factory premises or lodging premises provided by the managements, restriction of unionization by the managements, amendments of the labour laws by the local state governments and lack of grievance –redressal mechanism increasing work hours and shifts in favour of the factory managements are some of the many woes forced on the women workers of the garment industry, for which they find no means of amelioration or relief from their elected governments of the supposed parliamentary democracy.

Added to this the women workers in the garment industry of this 'modern' globalization era have no scope to work in their jobs till their superannuation, but the corporate managements engage them in work only in their young and youthful age that too as unmarried single women, without becoming entangled in pregnancy and child-bearing or any such encumbrance. This is the extra specific inhuman restriction imposed on the women workers of garment industry by the neo-liberal economy of reforms. In such a way the tenure of service of women workers is restricted making it inevitable to those oppressed women workers to leave off their jobs, to go to their native places and arrange their marriages and social lives.

It is noteworthy that majority of these women workers hail from rural India, that too mostly from Dalit and other backward classes. Such are the grim conditions to which they are forced to serve!

As mentioned in the earlier paras, the traditional and established trade-union movement is not only incapable of facing these challenges and protecting the interests and rights of the women workers (for that matter the abnormally increasing number of workers in unorganized, semi-organised and informal sectors), but even is not interested to take-up the cause of these workers owing to many of its weaknesses and ills. But it merely pretends with its formal and ritualistic activities as if still alive and capable of attending to the grievances in order only to be recognized by the governments in power, to provide the privileges being enjoyed by it from the time of transfer of power (1947); and for their betterment.

But the peculiar living, working and societal condition imposed on them, necessitated the women workers of garment industry, to take away (withdraw) their savings from their hard earned paltry wages with the E.P.F, including the amounts of the employers' contributions, while leaving away their jobs after a few years of work at the factories.

The NDA government unilaterally chose to locking these EPF savings, with EPFO till the day of the superannuation of workers(58 years of age), the last straw to flare up the situation in which, these women workers already with resentment, anger and dis-satisfaction about their unbearable living and working conditions in to agitational action.

In fact it was a section of workers' of Tamil Nadu's Tirupur knitting cluster who went on strike from April 4 demanding the roll-back of the amendment in the E.P.F scheme restricting the withdrawal of E.P.F. amounts saved in their accounts. Thus workers of three units ignited the spark of protest against restrictions of E.P.F. withdrawals arrogantly imposed by the NDA government. In the cluster of Tamil Nadu's Tirupur knitwear there are 4,00,000 workers out which 70% are women. There are around 70,000 women workers from other states including Odisha, Bihar, U.P and Nepal as well. It is mostly these North Indian workers who were on strike, since they leave their jobs after working for four or five years owing to various reasons, mostly for the reason of marriage. A fearing that this strike might spread to more units and cripple the Rs 23,500 crore sector Tirupur Exports Association (TEA) has asked the labour minister to address the problem. The association also informed the labour minister that "Due to the strike production has been got affected and the units will have difficulty in meeting their export delivery schedule" and warned that "these units might also incur financial losses and loose out on future orders".

Then it is the women workers of Brandix garment industry, situated in the special economic zone(SEZ) of A.P, near Visakhapatnam who went in to strike demanding the role back of restrictions of E.P.F withdrawal besides revision of their pay and betterment of working conditions from April 15, braving the despicable police oppression unleashed against them. The restrictions imposed on the E.P.F withdrawals is the main issue that goaded the 16,000 women workers of Brandix company owned by the Sri Lankan Multinational garment manufacturing and exporting company.

And finally it is the spontaneous agitation of the women workers of the garment industry of Bangalore which spread like a wild-fire among the 5,00,000 garment workers, demanding the roll back of restrictions on withdrawals of E.P.F, by the NDA government unilaterally and arrogantly bulldozing its way stamping on the rights of workers and locking their hard earned savings.

On April 18, it started at one factory where photo copies of a news paper stating about the imposition of restrictions or E.P.F withdrawals, leading the women workers take to roads; in a 'Flash strike' which spread to 8-10 other garment factories resulting in all the workers coming out and blockading Horse road. Elsewhere along the Bangalore -Mysore High way, thousands more squatted on the road, causing a gird-lock. The women workers have also announced that they would resign en mass, if their demand is not met, threatening the very existence of Rs 10,000 crore garment industry in Karnataka state. For two days women workers from 2500 factories in Karnataka rammed the roads continuing their struggle of protest agitation.

The rage and the spreading menace of protests throughout the export oriented garment industry in different parts of the country, the impending doom of garment industry in the wake of workers stricken the industry and the electoral calculations, since the elections are being conducted at that time in 5 states have forced the NDA rulers, to step back and roll-back the withdrawal restrictions of the E.P.F. amounts immediately.

This is how the women workers of garment industry have won a major victory for workers' rights, showing and affirming that the path of struggle alone can protect the interests of the workers of this country.

Many of the commentators on this garment workers spontaneous protest agitation are wondering how it became possible to them without the leadership of the traditional and established trade unions and lack of the customary methods of mobilization of workers.

The simple answer is dawning will not stop due to the absence of the crowing of the old cock!

That it is the unbearable living and working conditions of no help that have mobilised the workers in to the natural agitational path is the rational answer for their doubts. Leadership, organizational skills, ideological inspirations are the added conditions of advantage for a successful agitation, but are not the basic and fundamental pre-conditions for the rise of workers struggles! They can be developed even during the course of the workers struggles.

Whether the traditional and established trade unions leadership draws proper lessons from these women-workers agitations and rectify its weaknesses is a question to be seen in future experience, but it is definite that these agitations of women workers of garments industry are certainly inspiring, enkindling and reviving a hope of a better future of workers' movement in protection of the interests of the workers of this country!
