

Labour file:

Shall the workers have to Live at the Mercy of Rulers?

We are supposed to live in a democratic country, ruled by elected representatives of the people. We are also supposed to be living in an independent country that has ‘sacred’ Constitution which gives many freedoms and rights including the right to fight against exploitation. We are also supposed to be living in a country where a free, fair and impartial judicial system operates rendering impartial justice to all, protecting their rights and entitlements, dispensing the law equally, treating everyone as equal before law.

But the very recent experience of the workers of the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) of their 52 days strike raises serious questions and doubts about our system of rule and system of justice whether the workers who create and enhance wealth and bring about economic and social development have real rights or status of importance on par with the affluent sections of the people or not? And whether the workers shall have to live all their lives at the mercy of rulers?

49,000 workers of TSRTC were forced to go on to strike from October 5th, as the management of TSRTC and the government of Telangana state are unwilling to concede the just demands of the worker’s unions. Even though the unions have served a strike notice before a month as stipulated by the law neither the government nor the management nor the state labour department authorities have taken any positive action to avoid a strike in TSRTC – a public transport that would cause much inconvenience and hardships to the commuters – the public. The authorities behaved irresponsibly and carelessly in dealing with the unions in resolving the issue sincerely.

It is apparent from the aftermath happenings of the strike that the rulers of government of Telangana have taken the strike as an affront to their government and its prestige and taken up a vindictive attitude against the striking workers. They waged a fierce war against those striking workers as if they are its bitter enemies who have to be crushed once for all. It acted with unwarranted stubbornness of rivalry without any scruple against the striking workers. The Telangana government headed by KCR as the Chief Minister has acted adamantly against the worker’s strike. The CM, KCR, took the strike as a personal affront to him intended exclusively to black mail and defame him among the people of state, that too at the time of Huzurnagar bye elections to the Parliament. The CM instead of taking cudgel against Aswathama Reddy the convener of Joint Action Committee (JAC) of unions conduction the strike, who was the very creation of this own party TRS, a leader of Telangana Mazdoor union, with whom he has personal animosities, has taken an antagonistic attitude towards the TUs of TSRTC as well as the striking workers who have no personal or political enmity with him. There may be any justification to be personally antagonistic against Aswathama Reddy for his alleged mis use of influence on the decision of the strike, but there is no justification whatever to be antagonistic towards TUs and striking workers.

But the CM acted with utmost vehemence and untold ruthlessness in dealing with the striking workers. His government made every effort to stifle and disrupt the strike; by slandering the strike as ill-motivated, illegal and unjustified through extensive propaganda rousing anti-striking workers sentiment among the people. By announcing that the

striking workers themselves have ‘self-dismissed’ since they participated in the strike, he spread fear among the striking workers about the security of their jobs. He used police force against striking workers by arresting the leaders, rejecting police permissions for conducting various protests and arresting the striking workers. He made TSRTC to hire more private buses and temporarily recruit drivers and conductors to operate those hire buses as well as school buses. He gave permits to private operators on various RTC routes to operate as stage carriers. His government defended and justified its anti-strike policies in the High Court. To cause inconvenience to workers financially and to stop them from entering the strike, the wages earned for the month of September payable by 1st October were not paid intentionally. Even when the High Court directed to pay the pending wages, the government defeated the High Court directions by arguing of lack of sufficient funds due to strike.

After winning the Huzmagar elections, the CM became more aggressive and arrogant in denouncing the strike arguing that TUs have misguided the workers into strike and that TSRTC is incurring heavy losses for which the very workers are responsible and that the government cannot maintain the unviable and loss-making TSRTC by financing from the budget. He very skillfully projected as if the losses were due to the inefficient and irresponsible workers and that there is no justification in their strike demanding more financial benefits when the RTC is under serious financial stress and on the verge extinction. He compared the private bus operators that are earning profits though it is no secret that the private bus operators run their buses without permits, using the same registered number of bus having a permit as permit of several buses, evading taxes and exploiting the labour power of their workers by violating the labour laws etc., with loss making and unprofitable RTC, blaming

the workers for losses, skillfully hiding the realities and facts concerning the losses to RTC. Thus he projected to the people that the RTC workers are guilty of causing losses to RTC. The CM masterfully argued for privatization of RTC, championing the cause of privatization of public transport using the clause in the MV Act amended by the BJP government. He questioned the BJP party how it could advise him to desist from privatizing the RTC, while its government at the centre itself is divesting the PSUs. Thus he skillfully disarmed all his critics against his intentions of privatizing RTC and supporting striking RTC workers.

On the other hand, even the High Court could not come to the rescue of the striking workers despite its high-sounding time to time comments against the state government’s attitude and its tall claims that sky is its limits and of its unbridled powers to take any action. At least it humbled before the so-called powers of the legislative and of the state government. It failed to make TSRTC to pay due wages of September to the striking workers. In the name of law position, it distanced itself to pronounce that the TSRTC strike is not illegal. It clearly announced that it cannot stop privatization of TSRTC by invalidating the client’s decision to do so. It even had to admit that it cannot order the state government to enter and continue talks with the representatives of striking workers. The High Court has exposed amply the hollowness of our judicial system, judiciary that avoids rendering justice to the workers and their interests. When it comes to the interests of capitalist class these very courts does not hesitate even for a moment to ‘stay’ the governmental and labour departments orders of ‘illegal lock-outs’, ‘illegal en masse retrenchments’ and ‘illegal closures’ done by the private industries and businesses. Such class nature of our judicial system is clearly exposed in the case of strike in TSRTC. Even the High Court went to the extent of blaming

the JAC of TSRTC as responsible for the strike and woes of striking workers.

Even the so-called support to the Strike in TSRTC by the opposition political parties could not bring about any relief to the striking workers in resolving their problems. On the contrary they knowingly or unknowingly fuelled the ire of CM against striking workers with their irresponsible comments. For all these years of KCR's rule in the state they are unable to gain people's support. So they have chosen to utilize this opportunity of strike for their political gain by way of criticizing TRS and its head KCR in personal terms rather than the anti-people policies pursued by the government. They acted as usual to criticize as opposition parties the political party in power, while in power they themselves have adopted and implemented the very same anti-people policies and attitudes against worker's struggles. Particularly the leaders of BJP and Congress party instead of attempting to gain sympathy to the strike have irresponsibly cursed KCR in personal terms. All these parties have limited themselves to those activities that could attract the media. Their so-called activities of solidarity including their mass organizations are only peripheral to attract media than benefitting the striking workers. One can visualize how their activists smile to the TV cameras when they are being arrested, how their members walk without discipline and laughing all the time without any seriousness. Though most of the TUs in Telangana state are organized by these parties, they never have attempted to extend the strike in to other industries and institutions including the autoriksha unions and other private transport organizations despite their tall claims of having nation-wide transport workers' unions and federations. Even the so-called intellectuals of the left forces, including some of the revolutionary groups, who advocated for a separate Telangana state as a panacea for the all problems of the exploited,

oppressed and suppressed people by their so-called support could not do otherwise than chanting high phrased rhetoric than bringing about any real and material support to the striking RTC workers.

Particularly the BJP that is in power at the centre and having its member nominated as the governor of Telangana and intending to make inroads in to the state has chosen to keep striking workers as well as the people of Telangana in illusion that it would settle the issue through its power at the centre. It made the JAC and opposition parties to represent to the governor to resolve the dispute. BJP claimed that it would bring the issue and the attitude of TRS government to the notice of the central government leaders and ministers and use them to settle the problem. But the governor of the state while discussing the issue of strike instead of taking any steps to solve the issue has asked the state government what alternative steps they have taken to provide transport to the public as the strike is going on. This shows how the BJP or its governors or its government are not really interested in the protection of rights of workers but are interested only to gain popularity. Theirs' was only lip sympathy to the strike.

These conditions have allowed the CM to be more adamant against the striking workers in dealing with their strike issue insisting they withdraw their strike unconditionally, calling it illegal, unjustified and ill-motivated. He specifically blamed the TU leaders that they are the culprits who misguided the workers to enter into the strike. He explicitly advised the workers to join duties within the deadline time, without heeding their union leaders to save their jobs. Finding no positive outcome to this suggestion from the striking workers he became more and more adamant and aggressive in dealing with the strike.

Having left with no means to end the strike with any favourable or face saving way

out, the JAC was forced to end the strike unconditionally advising the workers to join in their duties after 52 days of a continued strike.

Thus the strike is brutally crushed by the CM beside the striking workers of TSRTC to succumb to the weaknesses inherent in their very worker's movement and surrender.

Even after the withdrawal and ending of the strike, the CM had not accepted to take back the workers on to their duties. As he has been already insisting that it was an illegal, ill directed and ill motivated strike to defame his or his government, he disallowed the workers to be taken in to the duty. Thus he has chosen to punish them by threatening them of their very livelihood for their 'misdeed' of following their TU leaders and enticing into an illegal strike.

This vindictive attitude of KCR surprised and shocked everyone. They were aghast when the workers ending their strike unconditionally and reported to duty are not taken on to duty, and the government arguing in the court that those striking workers have no right to claim even their unpaid wages for the month of September, since the government has every right to penalize the workers on illegal strike with the wages of 8 days for each day of illegal strike.

With this everyone from media, educated and all other sections of people who have been for all this time had strong belief on the virtues of our system of 'democracy' started to question how this monstrosity of not taking those workers even after their surrender can occur? And what will become the fate of these 49,000 workers since no other means of rescuing them is in sight? Specifically a question arose among the public how KCR once benefitted by the strike of RTC workers in achieving his goal of separate Telangana state, could oppose the strike of RTC workers on their justified demands? They started even wondering is it for this rot of 'golden telangana' that we have agitated? One

conductor who participated in the strike and who has reported to duty after its withdrawal and when was not taken back on duty felt humiliated and resigned his job. He lamented that, "we neither visualized nor thought of a dictator rule in Telangana, as separate was achieved with sacrifice of 1200 people and my fellow sisters and brothers in RTC blindly believed KCR during agitation and faced police lathis". The same has been the reaction of Telangana public and intellectuals who supported 'separate' Telangana struggle. They felt betrayed and helpless.

But surprisingly after four days of this dilemma and suspicion about the future of workers, suddenly KCR came out with his 'benevolent' and 'magnanimous' posture announcing that all the striking workers are being taken on to duty unconditionally since he is excusing them as they are misguided by the leaders of TUs. He also gave assurances that there will not be any victimization and announced that he would infuse Rs.100 crore in to TSRTC to operate it. He promised that he would also rescue the families of workers died during the strike by giving one job for each family of the deceased workers. He strongly advised the workers not to fall prey to TU leaders and be misguided by them and if they have any grievances they shall contact his government, through a new committee to be constituted for this purpose.

The gesture of benevolence of KCR has totally bowled his critics, intellectuals and public who has been skeptic about his autocratic rule, and they again started thanking him and raising him for his benevolence and magnanimity in pardoning the TSRTC workers. Thus KCR once again established himself as not only the 'victor' of the crisis but also as the 'father of Telangana state'.

These unforeseen developments are baffling not only the public but also the so-called intellectuals and political commentators who believed in a separate

Telangana state as a panacea to all woes of the suffering people.

There is nothing to confuse about these developments occurred during TSRTC strike and its aftermath. As victorious leaders of achieving Telangana state and as its elected leader of the government he intended to impress and insist that he is the ruler of the state and people of the state or his subjects to be ruled. He wanted to insist that he only is the master and the people are to be obedient to him being his subjects. In reality, he arbitrarily assumed the ‘guardianship’ of the people of the state insisting that he is the only man either to punish or to pamper them being their ‘saviour’! No one shall defy him or his orders!

Such is the message he is successfully able to give to the people through his adamant attitude against RTC workers strike. Such is the lesson he taught to the opposition parties and his critics who incessantly talk about lofty slogans like democracy, rights of people etc. All this is in tune with his feudal class nature which need not at all baffle anyone or form illusions about his benevolence and magnanimity.

Through his adamant attitude against the TSRTC workers strike, KCR is successful in moulding the public opinion that:

a) Privatization of industries is justified since the PSUs are inefficient and loss making;

b) The RTC workers/government employees have safe jobs, assured monthly salaries and benefits, near immunity from inefficiency, non-productivity and irresponsibility while lakhs of self employed like auto drivers, tach-driven company drivers like ola and uber who have been suffering with no security or assured entitlements, benefits and labour rights;

c) The TUs and their leaders are the culprits that misguide and misdirect the workers against their interests as well the legally elected and lawful governments.

KCR who disallowed to hike the bus fares of TSRTC for all these five years as a populist move to earn goodwill of the voters, has skillfully used the strike to hike the fares by 20 paise per km providing a chance to private bus owners to increase their bus fares.

Besides these, KCR established himself as a benevolent leader of the people. He gave a clear message that people, particularly the workers shall live at his mercy being their ruler. Such has been the essence and fundamental nature of KCR as the CM of his attitude towards strike of RTC workers.

While we are assessing class nature of the Telangana state government as its leader, it would be more appropriate and more important to asses why and how the TSRTC workers strike, the workers movement has failed and due to what weaknesses it has succumbed; since the its impact and adverse effects of this strike will not be limited to TSRTC itself but influence the entire worker’s movement of our country adversely.

This is not the first bitter experience of striking workers, as has been of the present day striking workers of RTC. In the past such unscrupulous, ruthless and adamant attitude against workers was experienced by the worker’s movement. It has experienced how a war was waged against the nationwide striking workers of All India Railway workers Federation and how the railway strike was suppressed with inhuman brutality in 1974 and victimized the railway workers participated in that strike.

Again the workers movement witnessed how the Jayalalitha government in Tamil Nadu has taken an adamant attitude against striking government employees denying them the right to strike.

But such past experiences could not bring any change in the understanding, out-look, orientation and practices of the trade union leaderships of the workers movement to sort out and rectify the weaknesses and correct themselves to equip the movement to face the

challenges from the rulers and ruling classes. On the contrary various trends, practices and weaknesses have crept into workers' movement which is not only harmful but fatal for the protection of workers' interests and their class interests at large. Due to various political reasons such harmful weaknesses have crept into the workers' movement.

All such weaknesses, trends and practices have crept into the movement of TSRTC workers also, though it had a glorious past of protecting the interests of the road transport workers in the state of Andhra Pradesh (former combine AP and Telangana states).

The workers movement of TSRTC has its origin from the historical Telangana peasant armed struggle against the despotic rule of Nizam during 1940 to 1951. In those days RTC of Telangana used to be NSRTD – Nizam state road Transport Department. During the period of Telangana peasant struggle the workers were organized in to union, where the workers not only fought for the protection of rights and entitlements of workers but also participated in struggles waged by the peasantry against the despotic rule by Nizam and thus the RTC workers movement continued to be a part and parcel of the movement of oppressed people which valiantly fought against typical feudal rule and tyranny of the Nizam's state.

Subsequently after the merger of Mizam state into Indian union and later formation of Andhra Pradesh as the first linguistic state, Road transport was nationalized and APSRTC was formed. The movement of road transport workers was extended throughout the AP. Upto 1970s, the RTC workers movement has been a model to the workers and employees movement in AP. In those days the NGO associations and the teachers associations used to put forward their demands of pay and entitlements on par with APSRTC employees.

But subsequently, owing to so many anti-working class trends, weaknesses and practices entering into the workers movement

of APSRTC and subsequently into the workers movement of TSRTC, the movement not only lost its effectiveness but also its very fundamental objective of protecting the interests of workers. It is reduced into a formal movement of pretence. Particularly the TSRTC movement has pushed the workers of TSRTC into the mire of illusion of a separate Telangana state that it would be more and more effective and conducive in realizing the objective of protecting the rights of the people as well as the workers of Telangana state. Such an illusion was strengthened and pervaded the transport workers movement by the rhetoric and exhortations of some left political parties and some revolutionary groups and their mass organizations. These parties and organizations refused to look into the class nature of the separate Telangana state demand and the class nature of the separate Telangana state slogan incited and led by the KCR and other leaders of ruling class parties that are vying for power and for its accommodation by bifurcating the then AP. These parties and their intellectuals have vehemently denied seeing the class nature of the separate state to be run by the exploitation by feudal and capitalist classes. They depicted the separation of Telangana as liberation from class exploitation, subjugation and oppression of people, but not as its continued class rule, instead of inculcating class orientation, class consciousness and working class politics into the transport workers movement. Added to this the method of recognition of TUs has brought out a permanent division in the unity of workers movement including the TSRTC where in the sole objective of TUs changed, only to get recognized and enjoy benefits from that rather than protecting the interests of member workers. All these anti-worker trends made the Telangana tranmsport workers movement an ally to the ruling class leader KCR, steeping it in to the illusion that KCR is the savior of deceived Telangana people. This non-class orientation mainly led to the

present tragedy of RTC workers; reduced them in to a state to live and languish at the mercy of the CM, KCR.

In fact and in reality, it was the KCR's party TRS that has created Telangan Mazdoor Union propping up Aswatha Reddy as its leader – general secretary- besides the then leader Harishrao as its President. The very same Aswntha Reddy is the convenor fo the present JAC of striking workers' unions. This leader has already been die-hard bureaucratic TU leader nurtured and moulded by the NMU leadership. Naturally the TMU being an ally of ruling political party TRS and its adherent it gained majority membership of TSRTC workers and recognized union status. It is no secret that owing to various differences with KCR in the personal advancement of the leader Aswatha Reddy, having a grouse against KCR has subsequently changed his loyalties with KCR and his party and went in to antagonistic position against them. His leadership of TMU came handy to him to confront with the KCR's government and particularly irking KCR. This has been – the illusion of workers about KCR and the personal differences and animosity between KCR and Aswatha Reddy played havoc against the TSRTC workers strike. Despite the unwavered unity, fighting spirit and natural workers militancy of striking workers, their very illusion about the state and ruling classes and neglect of their anti-worker attitudes and particularly about KCR hand neglect of his anti-people policies forced the striking workers to surrender and humble themselves at the mercy of KCR.

Aside this immediate weakness, there is persisting, anti-worker interest weakness in the TSRTC workers movement as has been ingrained in to the entire working class movement of country. This is the trade union bureaucracy – the bureaucrat leadership of TUs. This is the fatal weakness of workers movement. All most all the TUs existing in our country irrespective of their political

affiliations are established and led by this bureaucratic leadership which blatantly undermines trade union democracy. Instead of forming policies and organizing agitational activities basing on the aspirations and opinions of the members of their unions, the bureaucratic leadership imposes its opinions on the members. This leadership does not conduct general bodies of its members from the lower level, but only conducts mass meetings to impose its decisions on its members. This leadership cannot tolerate any of its members expressing different opinion against the opinion of leadership and often resorts to victimization of such a member in various forms. Sometimes this leadership will allow only its henchmen as office bearers and if it is not possible they run away with minute books and get stay order from the courts. They resort to collection of membership of the union not directly from the members but directly from managements which deducts it from the wages of members. This method of collecting the membership deprives the member-worker to have a regular contact with the leaders and questioning them of their day to day grievances and demands etc. In APSRTC workers fought against such collection of membership by the management and were able to stop. But again the collection of union membership is revived in APSRTC and TSRTC by the bureaucratic leaders.. Due to lack of trade union democracy, the members have little scope of salvation and solution of their grievances and protection of their interests.

All most all the leaderships of TUs in TSRTC are bureaucratic and strongly established in the unions with their own vested interests. This is one of the reasons that the strike of TSRTC workers had to succumb to the anti-worker and anti-trade union propaganda attack made by KCR and his government. It is no secret that KCR intended to unpopular and weed out Aswatha Reddy of JAC from the leadership of the union from its members.

The timing selected for conducting the strike by the JAC too is the one of the causes that led to the surrender of the striking workers. TSRTC being a public transport, its main function is providing transport to the public. The Batukamma and Dussera festivals and examinations for students are more important for the people to have easy transport to move freely. But JAC has chosen this particular time to conduct strike that caused unjustified inconvenience for more than 12 lakh people who commute daily using TSRTC. From the long past it has become the practice of the bureaucratic leadership of TUs in RTC to shoes such times of festival when the public mostly and necessarily needed the public transport since it is the time of vulnerability for the management and the state government to givein for the conceding demands. But they knowingly undermine the inconvenience and difficulties caused to travelling public in their festival times and if the strike is conducted they lose not only the sympathy of general public but have to face anger and ire of the people. The same thing has occurred during the present strike of RTC workers who lost the sympathy support from the public. KCR and his government have skillfully utilized the ill timing of the strike to their advantage.

Another factor for the weakness of the strike of TSRTC workers is improper and insufficient preparations for the strike. Only the workers were told to go in to strike, but not made them understand that they have to conduct a prolonged strike, without wages and that they have to face the bitter opposition of the government in various forms and that they shall be equipped to face all eventualities by making necessary arrangements – particularly the required financial arrangements to sustain prolonged strike. The leadership of JAC has also not made necessary and sufficient preparations fro the strike to gain sympathy of the people impressing the necessity of strike and the

causes that led to the continuous losses to the RTC are the policies of the government. The JAC leadership has even failed during the strike to counter effectively the propaganda war waged against striking workers and their unions. This condition of insufficient and required preparation for strike has not only led to sentimental immolation of some striking workers besides forcing the striking workers of RTC to surrender to the disadvantageous and unfair conditions.

The strike is a collective struggle of workers but not an effort of individual leader and leadership. The decisions either to continue or disband the strike has to be decided collectively by the workers. But JAC failed to act in that direction limiting itself to take crucial decisions on behalf of the workers. This method of functioning is a cause that led to the surrender of strike rather than a tactical retreat in the circumstances that are not conducive to prolong the strike.

Even the forms of protest adopted by the JAC leadership are not proper forms of protest during workers agitations that too during the strike. They lack the seriousness required for a serious life and death workers' struggle. These forms may have appeared attractive and fun-making, but not proper forms of protest for workers with their livelihood at stake. These forms of so-called 'protest' could have been handy for the political agitations conducted by a section of ruling class against another section in their tussle for power; but will not help to inculcate political as well as class consciousness among the participating workers.

Again the slogans made to be chanted by the strikers cursing KCR in vulgar personal terms instead of giving slogans against the anti-worker and anti-TSRTC policies adopted by the government that could have not only strengthened the class militancy of striking workers, but also benefitted them by drawing more sympathy and solidarity from the people. But the slogan made to be given may

appear funny and ‘creative’ but could not help the striking workers.

No doubt even if taken all the proper steps and required preparations with required seriousness and class orientation, there is no guarantee that the workers’ strike wins and achieves their objects in the present day political and social conditions prevailing in our country. A formal approach in conducting the serious form of strike as agitations without correct and proper directions will not only harm the interests of the workers but also result in disasters as has occurred in TSRTC strike.

Worker shall be oriented with working class politics, but not with the ruling class politics and practices, the class consciousness has to be inculcated among workers to enable them to rise and fight for the protection of their rights. Even if their struggle is limited in gaining economic demands, the workers must be oriented with class consciousness.

This is a must even for the TU movement.

But owing to various anti-worker trends – like economism, formalism, legalism, regional, caste and national chauvinism, reliance on the leaders of ruling parties and illusion about those leaders – penetrating into workers movement during course of these 72 years of our independent India, gradually the workers movement lost its strength in protecting even the economic interests of workers and the TU bureaucracy is running the workers movement time and again failing to deliver goods as has been occurred in the present strike RTC workers.

This bitter experience of the strike of workers of TSRTC shall open the eyes of not only the leadership of the workers movement but also the well-wishers of workers welfare and the protection of their rights, and draw proper and required lessons to rectify various harmful trends and weaknesses infested the present day workers movement in our country.
