

STRUGGLE IN DEFENCE OF VISHAKHA STEEL PLANT

The decision of Central Government to privatise the Vishakha Steel Plant (VSP) has seriously disturbed the workers, employees, the vast masses of people who fought for it and who shed their sweat and blood for its development. Quite naturally, the workers, employees, students, youth, women, democratic forces and parties rose against the decision. All united in a common platform called "Vishakha Steel Plant Protection Committee" and began a united protest movement.

Seeing the mood of the people, the State Government headed by the YSRCP came out telling that it too is opposed to the privatization of VSP and it will strive to convince the Central Govt. to change its decision. But the Central Govt. took no time to announce that its decision is irreversible. In a reply to a question in Lok Sabha on March 8th, 2021, the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitaraman made it clear that 'the govt. would go ahead with 100% disinvestment of Vishakha Steel equity in RINL along with its stakes in subsidiaries/ joint ventures through strategic disinvestment by way of privatization.' At another occasion, the representative of Central Govt. has bluntly said that the govt. will close down the VSP if no one comes forward to buy it. A news is in circulation that POSCO – a Multinational Steel Company based in South Korea is proposing to buy the VSP. Now the people are left with no other option but to wage an organized and united struggle in defense of the VSP.

The Indian ruling classes and their Govt. for over a period of time had been raising the populist slogans of different types to attract the people to their side. The slogans like 'Garibi Hatao', 'welfare schemes, reforms, socialist pattern of society were only a part of them. On one side, they provided all support and avenues for the imperialists and Indian Comprador bourgeoisie to freely invest in India, loot and control the natural and human resources of our Country. On the other side, they were building up a few basic industries and infrastructure which require huge investments in the public sector and running them in a way to meet the needs of private sector. They were showing them as symbols of progressive and the policies of socialist pattern. Ever since the Indian ruling classes adopted the policies of Liberalization, privatization and globalization, these progressive masks were gradually put aside and countless steps were taken to more nakedly promote the private sector. The rulers have done everything to starve the public sector industries and use their losses and failures as a plea to push through the disinvestment and privatization. This process began in the period of Congress rule and gained speed and momentum in the time of BJP's rule. The words like progressivism and development lost their meanings and acquired opposite meanings.

As far as the general mass of the people are concerned, they wished India to develop independent and in an all round manner. They wished that the natural and human resources abundantly available in our Country must be used for this kind of development and in the interests of people. The people wished that the disparities in the development of areas must be removed and the industries and projects must be built and run in the interests of our Country and people. They also wished that the development policy of rulers must not be aimed at or lead to develop some areas as islands of development and condemn vast areas to neglect, discrimination and backwardness.

Struggle for Vishakha Steel Plant

The people of AP (then, united) had to wage a massive struggle during 1966 and 1971 for Vishakha Steel Plant.

The people had enthusiastically welcomed the statement of the then Union Finance Minister C. Subramaniam in 1963 that the Centre was contemplating to set up a steel plant in Vishakhapatnam, AP. On July 1st, 1966, the AP State Assembly adopted a unanimous resolution welcoming the VSP. But the Central Govt. had taken no concrete step towards the setting up of the Plant. This had agitated the people and political forces much and they moved into a massive protest action.

The protest was organized, militant and had drawn every section of people, democratic and political forces into a massive united action led by the all Party Joint Action Committee. It adopted different forms of struggle like hunger strike, meetings, rallies, rail roko, General Strike. The students of all universities and colleges in the state had thrown themselves in to the protest movement. Vishakha, Guntur, Krishna, Khammam, Warangal, Hyderabad and many other towns had become the centres of militant protest movement. The students of Medicine, Engineering and other technical courses were most active, stood in the forefront and lent a militant form to the protest movement. The

Communists who were a powerful force in AP at the time – both inside the State Assembly and among the people – together with the democratic forces played a leading role in the entire protest movement.

The Congress Govt. in the State used iron fist to crush the protest movement. It freely rained lathis, tear gas and bullets on the people. It shot down 32 people in various towns of the state. Quite justifiably, this has infuriated the people much. The protest movement had taken a more serious form.

The parties of opposition had moved a no-confidence motion in the State Assembly in protest against the State Government's policy of brutal repression. But the Congress Party had defeated it with its brute majority. In protest, 67 MLAs led by the Communists had submitted their resignations to the State Assembly. They included the veteran leaders like T.Nagi Reddy, P. Sundaraiah and Vavilala Gopala Krishnaiah. The Communist MPs from AP too had sent their resignations to the Parliament. These actions were co-ordinated with the militant protest movement of the vast masses of people in a way to further strengthen and intensify the protest movement.

This was also a period when the contradictions among the ruling classes and the contradictions between the Centre and States also had intensified. Massive peoples' movements and democratic movements had erupted in various states against the autocratic and over centralization of powers in the centre and anti-people policies of the Central Govt. In the background of this situation, the Congress Governments had fallen in 9 states reflecting serious economic and political crisis in the Country. Revolutionary politics too had come on the scene pointing out the explosive nature of the agrarian crisis and the need of its revolutionary resolution.

In the course of these developments, Ms. Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India, laid the foundation stone for VSP on Jan 20, 1971.

Thus the VSP was a product of prolonged struggles and sacrifices of people. The struggle to win it was one part. The efforts and sacrifices made by the Vishakhapatnam people to provide the land and other requirements for the setting up of the VSP is another part. The struggle of the displaced people to get the promises made by the Central Govt. honoured (yet to be) was another part. All the development and results achieved by the VSP in the last four decades are nothing but the result of sweat and bloodshed by the workers and people. The workers and people had to wage a most difficult struggle on one side, to save the VSP from gross neglect and the Central Govt.'s policy of starving the plant for raw material and financial aid and, on the other hand, from the concerted attempts on the part of the Centre to sell away the plant in parts or as a whole. Now, again, when the Central Govt. has come with a decision to sell away the VSP – lock, stock and barrel – a people's wealth which had developed into a monumental wealth with the sweat and blood of workers and people, the peoples' struggle had entered into a most crucial phase. It is most treacherous and against the will and interests of our people to sell away the people's wealth which is considered to be a big source of livelihood and hoped to ensure better wages, conditions of work, security and rights for the laboring masses of people. This act of Central Govt. will throw away thousands of workers and millions of people into a most uncertain future.

Tasks before the People

Here the people have two tasks before them. 1. Struggle to protect the VSP; 2) Prepare for a prolonged struggle against the policy of privatization aggressively pursued by the present BJP Govt.

The Union Finance Minister has said in her recent Budget (2021-22) speech: "We have kept four areas that are strategic where bare minimum Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) will be maintained and rest privatized. In the remaining sectors, all CPSEs will be privatized." Soon after the BJP assumed power in May 2014, the PM Narendra Modi announced that the Govt. had "no business to be in business."

Privatizations continued unabatedly. The Air India, BPCL, Shipping Corporation of India, Container Corporation of India and Pawan Hans etc were sold away. Decks are cleared to sell away or close down 439 CPSEs along with their subsidiaries. The BSNL, Insurance, Banks, Air Ports, Railways and Transport and many other sectors were brought into the ambit of disinvestment and privatization. The prime minister has, once again, reiterated that the Govt. has no business to be in business. The essence of the policy is clear: No sector can escape the axe of privatization.

At one time, the Indian rulers were telling that basic industries are crucial for economic development. But now they are bluntly declaring that it is not part of their business to continue them in the public sector and are selling them away whole sale. They make a big hue and cry when a PSE incurs some loss. But they write off lacs of Crores of rupees of bank loans the big corporate companies fail

to pay on the plea of incurring losses. Getting their debts written off has become a most easy and convenient means of robbing the public money for the big corporate houses in India. Selling the PSEs, natural resources and other wealth of our country to the foreign and Indian big corporates which is sought to be pushed through aggressively by the present rules is a most powerful means for them to rob and control our economy and lives of people.

As it continue to be the policy of Indian rulers to fully and nakedly impose the oppressive control of the imperialist and their Indian compradors on the Indian economy and lives of our people, it becomes the most essential task of our people to oppose this policy tooth and nail and carry on the struggle to break the stranglehold of these oppressors and exploiters. The workers, employees, students, youth, democrats and all the people who are opposing the privatization of Vishakha Steel Plant must see their struggle as part of this larger struggle. They must unite with the people who are carrying the struggle in various parts of the country for similar causes.

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