

Workers, Peasants Rise again in Protest to Demand Government Benefits -

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A huge protest rally in Delhi sought to highlight various issues faced by them. A universal pension and a minimum wage were among the demands.

"I have been an Anganwadi worker for as long as I can remember. It's been close to 35 years," said Parveena, a worker under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme in Kulgam, Kashmir. "They retire us at 60 years like other government employees but they do not give us the status and salary of government employees. Who will support us in our old age? They lifted Article 370 and brought our State under the Central government but our salaries didn't change. We have come here to make the government listen." Parveena was at the Ramlila Ground in Delhi on April 6 along with thousands of other peasants and workers ready to stay on until the government listened. The Delhi heat did not bother them. Parveena was the Block president of the Kulgam district Anganwadi Union. She said that she was paid an honorarium of Rs.4,100 for all kinds of work under government schemes.

The protest rally was for a bunch of demands: the scrapping of four labour codes and the Electricity (Amendment Bill), the expansion of work days under the MGNREGA to 200 days, a universal pension of Rs. 10,000 a month, a minimum wage of Rs. 26,000 a month, the scrapping of contractualisation of work, and a legal guarantee for a Minimum Support Price based on the C2+50 formula recommended by the Swaminathan Commission. The organisers, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and the All India Agricultural Workers' Union (AIAWU), also included in it the universalisation of the Public Distribution System and withdrawal of the controversial amendments to the Forest (Conservation) Act.

The economist Prabhat Patnaik, who was among the speakers, observed that the coming together of the three labouring classes—industrial workers, peasants, and agricultural workers—was historic. "These are the producing classes who have been worst hit by neo-liberalisation," he said.

"Chaar hazaar mein dum nahi; chabbis hazaar se kam nahi", (4,000 is nothing; we won't settle for anything less than 26,000 a month) was the rallying cry of the workers, among them were ICDS helpers, health workers under the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) scheme, and Mid-Day Meal scheme workers. The more than one crore "scheme" workers, as they are called, have been demanding recognition as permanent workers with decent salaries and social security for several years now.

"Itna anushashit rally maine kabhie nahi dekha, aur itne badey paimane mein," said a sub-inspector at Ramlila Grounds referring to the huge swathe of disciplined, working-class participants who had converged by road and rail at the national capital from across the country. A day earlier, the traffic police had issued warnings about route changes for commuters but it did not seem like the close to 70,000 participants caused any major disruptions for Delhi residents.

This was the second mega rally to be held at Ramlila Ground after 2018. The mobilisation for the latest one had begun in September 2022 when all the constituent fronts decided that it was necessary to bring their issues to Delhi again. The successful farmers' protest leading to the withdrawal of the three farm laws was a motivating factor, said an organiser. The rally was organised to articulate the discontent among the working population of the country against the policies of the Central government, said Hannan Mollah, AIKS vice-president. Mollah, a former Lok Sabha member from West Bengal, was a prominent face in the Samyukta Kisan Morcha, the front that had led the farmer protests.

Close to 20,000 agricultural workers were in the rally, many of them women. MGNREGA wages and shortage of work was a big issue for the *khet mazdoor* or agricultural workers, said Vikram Singh, AIAWU joint secretary. The men were migrating for distress work whereas the women were engaged in agricultural work. "There has been an increased feminisation of work in this sphere and it is a big debate in academic circles as well," he said. All stakeholder sections unanimously demanded that the government guarantee 200 days of work at the rate of Rs.600 or more a day.

"The government has to take back the system of online attendance and the Aadhaar-linked Direct Benefit Transfer of payments for ration under the Public Distribution System," said Singh. Another relevant aspect was the atrocities on and isolation of Dalits, which he said was linked to the increasing privatisation of services. "With growing privatisation of public services, Dalits are getting pushed further behind and literally out of the system. The majority of agricultural workers are Dalits," he said.

No Floor Wage

There was no declared minimum statutory floor wage for agricultural workers. State governments declared their own rates, which were barely implemented. There was no agency to ensure the implementation, Singh said. In some States, the MGNREGA wages were lower than the minimum declared wage for agricultural workers. There was also a wide disparity in agricultural wage rates between states, which could range from Rs. 700 or more in Kerala to Rs. 170 in Bihar. Despite 75 years of independence, India has no comprehensive Central legislation. "This is one of the biggest demands today. Committees have been set up and some private members' Bills were also moved but there has been no forward movement on enacting a Central legislation for wages of agricultural workers," he said.

Uncaring governments

Frontline spoke to a cross section of the participants. Suresh Paswan, an agricultural worker from Begusarai, Bihar, said they get paid anywhere between Rs.100-150 as daily wages if there was work available. "Bihar has 22 lakh acres and an equal number of agricultural workers. The Nitish Kumar government did not do anything about the report on land reforms whereby we were supposed to be given pattas," he said. He was referring to the D. Bandopadhyay report on Bihar's land reforms. Paswan, who is associated with the Agricultural Workers Union, said that in Pipra Dodraj Panchayat, 500 families of landless workers were settled in homesteads from 2010-12 but in 2019, a bulldozer uprooted all the families. "The land is lying just like that. The zamindar cultivates it," he said.

Sanjay Shri Rajat from Madhepura had a similar tale. "We don't get 100 days of work," he said. "In MGNREGA, JCB machines are used instead of human labour. The Central government talks big and makes tall promises. There are no factories where we can get work. *Kadwa tel* (mustard oil) sells at Rs. 200 a litre. *Kya khaaye, kya bachaaye?* [what shall we eat; what do we save?]."

Brajesh, a farmer from Ghaziabad had a different concern. He said that if the government did not declare a Minimum Support Price and guarantee-assured procurement, farmers would stop producing. "The government gives us Rs. 2,000 and takes Rs. 20,000 from us," he said, referring to the dole given under the PM Kisan Yojana. This amount was meaningless as the costs of fertilizers and gas cylinders had gone up. He said one kilogram of potash sold at Rs. 700 a kg seven years ago, but now it was Rs. 1,700. Gas cylinder rates had likewise gone up to Rs. 1,130, he said.

Karamveer Singh, a farmer from Aligarh, complained that fertilizer supplies at government cooperative societies were never available on time. There was black marketing, too, he claimed. In several rabi-producing States like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, fertilizer shortages were reported. "Our entire family labour engages in agricultural operations. We take loans. If a farmer does not get the rate for his crops, the loans the bank give us against the Kisan Credit Card are useless as the interest rates are high. What use is the Rs. 2,000 in the face of so much inflation?" Singh said.

He claimed that there was no difference between the *khet mazdoor* (agricultural worker) and the *kisan* (farmer). The average land holding that farmers had was between 1 and 2 hectares, he said, which in fact approximated the national average of the size of land holdings in India as per the Agriculture Census. "We are as good as agricultural labourers. Farming and agriculture alone does not meet even our basic expenses. Everything is private today; health, education," he said.

Sugarcane Farmers' Demands

Sugarcane farmers had their own woes. They complained that the Central government had increased the Fair and Remunerative Price for sugarcane only by Rs. 70 in the last four years. They said the government ought to fix a price of Rs. 500 per quintal or Rs. 5,000 a tonne as input costs had gone up. At present, the FRP was Rs. 2,820 a tonne. Balwant Singh, a

sugarcane farmer and a Kisan Sabha leader from Haryana, said that the sugar mills always defaulted on payments. "Only when we agitate are the payments made. There are cooperative sugar mills but there are plans to hand them over to private players," he told *Frontline*.

Much of the mainstream media seem to have ignored the large rally. "If it is a politician's speech, especially of the ruling government, the TV channels would carry the news the whole day. They have no time for us," said Parveena, the ICDS worker from Kulgam. "But we will come again and again if the government doesn't listen to us."

Courtesy with 'Frontline', May 5, 2023