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India

# Greater than the Might of Armies

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV458 - March 2013 -

Publication date: Saturday 2 March 2013

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**Over one hundred million workers across India struck work for two days, on 20 and 21 February. The precise number is difficult to ascertain, but the strike went beyond the expectation of the trade union leaders and the bosses alike. This makes it probably the biggest general strike in working class history. Throughout the two days of the strike, Indian television channels and the internet were filled with comments on how the strike was a flop, how it was useless, how workers were violent, how the trade union leaders were selfish people leading poor workers up the garden path. The very vehemence of these campaigns was evidence of the gradual awakening of a sleeping giant, the working class of India, showing its massive power. Were this force to be mobilised properly, were it to fight for its goals with a greater clarity of vision, it could claim to be greater than the might of armies. But today, it is still partially hobbled. Both dimensionsâ€”the struggle and the limitationâ€”require explanations.**

## General Strikes

The term general strike, if loosely used, can cause problems. Today, it is no longer possible to remain satisfied with what Luxemburg or Trotsky wrote after 1905, or with experiences of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.

For anarcho-syndicalists, the general strike was to be the final cataclysmic battle, when capitalism and the state alike would be paralysed. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) picked up this idea. The general strike is the measure by which the capitalistic system will be overthrown. As a result of this “general lockout of the employing class”, control of industry will pass from the capitalists to the masses and capitalists will vanish from the face of the earth.

As one 1905 German syndicalist pamphlet argued, the general strike was the “new weapon of the struggling proletariat” for at least two historical reasons. For one, revolution on the barricades, as in 1848, was no longer feasible in modern cities with their wide streets, not to mention the advances in military technology already apparent by then. A national or even international universal work stoppage, however, would stretch the military too thin to break it, it was argued. For another, “modern industry, with its extremely specialized labour division and complications is but poorly adapted to oppose a general strike, even one initiated by a minority of the working class. However, Marxists in the Second International had a more nuanced position. They rejected the idea that a general strike by itself could topple the ruling class and its state. Nonetheless, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky and others did write about the general strike, and after the Russian Revolution, it was clearly viewed as an instrument of mass working class struggle.

In India, the idea of the general strike evolved in two ways. Under Gandhian leadership, the nationalist movement did not want specifically proletarian forms of struggle. But it did develop the hartal – a mass stoppage including shutting down of shops and marketplaces, transport strike, etc. The rise of the communist movement and mass trade unionism saw the growth of industrial strikes, from which mass strikes could also develop. In 1946, supporting the striking post and telegraph workers, the workers from all over India responded to the call of the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC, then the sole all India TU) and went on strike. There had also been a mass strike over the attempted trial of Captain Rashid Ali, an Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauz) officer earlier in the year, as well as strikes in Bombay and elsewhere supporting the revolt of the Royal Indian Navy sailors.

After independence, the aura of being the leaders of the nation meant the Congress could exercise hegemony for a considerable period, and attempts at general strikes, especially during ultra-left swings of the CPI or its heirs were not successful.

The situation also worsened due to the transformation of the trade union movement. In 1946, the AITUC had been the sole trade union federation at the all India level. Subsequently, every political party with some importance tried to develop a trade union wing. As a result, India now has a large number of all India trade union federations, often several of which try to work in the same work place.

## Neo-liberalism and Struggles

United agitation by all the unions has been very difficult. However, the beginning of the neoliberal offensive brought about a change. Real wages began to fall in the organised sector. Job security worsened. Contractisation increased. As a result, strikes in various industrial and service sectors increased, as did bigger (general) strikes. Between 1991 and 28 February 2012, there were 15 general strikes in India. There was of course no continuous upsurge of the class struggle all the way through.

In 1991, it was mainly the left trade unions and left leaning mass organisations of various kinds that banded together in the National Campaign Committee. However, the predominantly Stalinist left wing politics in India, turning to social democracy, had no overall response. Rather, their class collaborationist politics of Popular Frontism, falsely paraded as “anti-fascist united front”, hobbled the working class. In 1992, the communal-fascist RSSâ€”VHP-BJP-BD combine (often called the Sangh Parivar), destroyed the Babri Masjid. This was followed by the decision to lower the anti-neoliberalism struggle’s pitch, since fascism had to be combated. [1] As a result, the Left parties in parliament chose to tolerate the P.V. Narasimha Rao government as the lesser evil. Which was followed by a so-called United Front government with the CPI providing ministers and the CPI(M) and RSP providing outside support. None of this meant any halt to neoliberalism. P. Chidambaram, who had served as a minister in the Narasimha Rao government, became Finance Minister in the UF and presented what the industrialists called a dream budget. Then came the turn of the BJP and its partners in the NDA. They continued the same neoliberal trends, combining them with pogroms and communal politics. This provided the left with “reasons” to again support the Congress in forming UPA-I in 2004. [2] Though the left got its highest ever tally in parliament that year, instead of fighting tooth and nail for the policies whose supposed defence had garnered it the votes, it chose to soft pedal these issues. In West Bengal, where it ruled, the Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee indeed tried to follow a similar policy.

The non-left unions, notably the INTUC, close to the Congress, and the BMS, close to the BJP, have also been wary of supporting militant actions. Even though on paper the BJP has often opposed neo-liberalisation in the name of swadeshi (indigenous enterprise), this has been a rhetoric to gain support while in opposition. Generally the BMS has not joined in the major strikes, as in 2010.

The situation was however changing by 2012-13. In 1991-92, the left parties and following them the trade unions had been reeling from the shock of the collapse of the USSR and the East European bureaucratised workers’ states. A new generation of working class has grown up since thenâ€”often unorganised, but also not burdened with the memories of defeats and false ideological blinkers.

The repeated strikes by workers in the first place presented a different picture of India to the world than the one better known. They showed that India was not only a new economic miracle, and not just full of peasants committing suicide, but also a country with the second biggest working class in the world, and right now, among the most militant.

# The Old Unions and the New

Why did the Central Trade Unions take such a major action? In the first place, there has been a continuous pressure on the working class. There has accordingly also been a growing anger about losses, job cut in the manufacturing sector, the decline in employment, the growing casualisation of labour, the growing insecurity, etc. A large part of these workers also form the union membership and hence put pressure on the unions to act. The union leadership – however, bureaucratic they might be – cannot ignore these signals altogether. Indeed, the national leaderships of the major trade unions intend to limit the action to tokenism, but rank-and-file pressure is growing in favour of militant actions including strikes. This was the first reason to go in for a two day general strike, following last year's one day general strike. [3]

Contrary to the ultra-left posturing that sees in trade union bureaucracies only betrayals, we argue that trade union bureaucracies, precisely because they derive their positions - including the occasional favours from the ruling class - because of the working class, has been deeply upset by the changed relationship since the onset of globalisation. At times, within their reformist framework, they have even challenged the left party leaderships. Thus, in 2010, Gurudas Dasgupta of the AITUC responded to Buddhadev Bhattacharjee's criticism of trade unions, who allegedly go on strike at the drop of a hat, by saying "Before Buddhadev was born, before I was born, the workers have protested through strikes". [4]

The ground realities show that in the last two decades, the membership of trade unions have remained stagnant, if not declining. Their activities have been more or less confined to the organised sector, more so to the public sector enterprises – from where over 70% of the membership is drawn. In the past, the state ownership on the one hand and trade unions' closeness to political parties made not only the unionisation work but also made easier securing non-productivity related financial benefits in the public sector establishments. With the onset of the liberalisation process that included disbanding of the public sector the trade-unions' capacity to influence political leadership in securing due demands weakened, causing the labour movement to move from one stage of marginalisation to the other.

Moreover, the very party-union relationship has meant a multiplicity of unions, including multiple unions in each workplace. These also involve over-centralised decision making, ad hoc management, obsolete strategies, external and over-aged leaders, personalized and power-oriented leadership, confrontationist attitudes, non-existent second tier leadership, and negligible gendering at both leadership structure and demands and programmes of action. All these have created distances between trade-unions and the mass of workers. Even though workers adhere to formal membership, they do not have a sense of belongingness to unions any more as in the past. An ILO 2004 survey report found that in Gujarat, only 20% of respondents knew about trade unions and worse still, 33% of the respondents believed the best means of representing work-related interests were by direct representation to employers, as against 7.4% who preferred the union and 14.8% that preferred direct collective action.

Political parties in past relied on trade-unions to secure hegemony and also garner crucial votes during the elections. However, in this latest phase of capital accumulation, parties do not lay much of an emphasis on the unions which they have assumed to be 'tamed' in the absence of a militant workers movement. G. Sanjeeva Reddy, the president of INTUC, the trade union federation affiliated to the ruling Congress party has no voice within his party on economic and political issues, in spite of being a member of the highest body, i.e. the Congress Working Committee (CWC). In another situation, in 2006, during the four-day strike and struggle against airport privatisation by the airport workers workers, CITU and CPI(M) leader M.K. Pandhe endorsing the movement was strongly criticising the Central Government; while the CPI(M) leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee tendered an apology to a meeting of Indian industrialists for the actions of his party-members in bring the Kolkata airport to a halt. This time also, Bhattacharjee opposed the general strike. And in West Bengal, the CPI(M) knuckled under to bourgeois pressure, so that there was a clear distancing from the CITU, in the name of observing Mother Language Day. [5]

Over the years, the left parties moved away from an independent class action towards building regional power bases and patronage networks by their position to distribute privileges and building a mighty set of beneficiaries right from the local capitalists to unemployed youth on the streets. For years they have limited themselves to working within the confines of the capitalist system, and therefore had no choice but to continue with their attacks on the workers. In spite of the bureaucratisation, back in 50s and 60s a chunk of the leadership was with a trade-unionist background; in the current scenario the really influential leaders are seldom even from trade union background (regardless of whether they themselves are/were workers).

Since mid 1980s, organised labour has not been able to challenge the changing ideology of the ruling class. The multiplicity of unions led to a severe inter-union rivalry, which promoted a parochial and unprincipled view of membership among the union leaders. Since the unions' bargaining strength is positively related to their size, membership was a crucial element to be inflated. Eventually, some unions realized that only an independent, vigorous labour organization that enjoys the loyalty of the members has any chance of standing up to the challenges from management and the government, as well as the problem of multiple unionism. As it seemed that national unions or union federations were toeing the lines of specific parties, many of the "independent" unions that developed started abandoning politics in the name of safeguarding workers' interests. The ineffectiveness of politically affiliated unions as also of CTUOs affiliated to one or other political parties created conditions in which workers found their membership to unions of little practical use. In spite of these, another sort of unions emerged which were unaffiliated and also very militants, particularly, at plant levels, e.g. workers initiatives at Kanoria and Victoria Jute Mills (West Bengal); Kamani Tubes (Maharashtra); Madura Coats (Kerala) to the Maruti plant at Manesar. Sometimes independent unions have tried to stick to pure economic unionism. At other times, they have had to take up political issues in some form. The enterprise level independent unions are also functional at Siemens, Brooke Bond, Pfizer, and other multinational companies.

In the process a number of independent unions have been found by workers to be more acceptable. There has also been the growth of a significant independent trade-union federation, the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), which currently has a membership of over 11 lakhs (1.1 million). Realising the disastrous effect of disunity within working class, a section of independent, but militant and socially conscious section of working class realised the necessity of building a nationwide federation, unbiased from political loyalty but focussed for workers causes took a pioneering role to form NTUI, not for a further division within the working people, but to uphold their unity. From the Intent Document of NTUI, "For a New Initiative" in 2001 till its founding conference in 2006 "Unity is the Perspective" has remained the central slogan of NTUI, that is judiciously followed in every action of the federation. NTUI has sought continuous dialogues with other Central Trade Union Federations like AITUC, HMS, CITU etc to ensure unity of working class within a single union in the workplace.

Under the circumstances, if the central trade unions of the old type simply ignored the workers' pressures, they stood to lose their support base.

## Conditions of workers under neoliberalism

Writings, whether by bourgeois media commentators or by the so-called common person (who is capable of going online for hours) suggest that lazy workers are demanding hikes in spending on them at the cost of the hard working real people. Thus, one writer commenting on a post wrote: "This is what happens when citizens get addicted to free money. Trade unions saw central govt. distributing freebies through NREGA etc. and now they want a slice of the pie too. What no one cares to understand is the fact that money has to be earned, it cannot be printed. More you print, more its value gets eroded and we are back to square one." [\[6\]](#)

So workers basically want freebies, without working.

*The Telegraph*, a rabidly rightwing voice of the ruling class, a daily that in its quest for ever superior models of neoliberalism is willing to support the fascist Narendra Modi's bid to become Prime Minister, had this to say, in part, in its editorial on 20 February:

"If the strike is aimed at forcing the government to change some of its policies, it may have already failed to do any such thing. It is unlikely that the government will roll back the reformist policies under pressure from the trade unions. There are compelling economic reasons as to why the reformist policies, which the trade unions oppose, are crucial to the country's economy. One of the issues on which the strike has been called relates to the alleged violations of labour laws. The fact of the matter is, however, very different. Outdated labour laws are a major reason for low productivity and low investment rates in India. If anything, the labour laws need to be amended in order to make them suitable for a modern economy. Rising prices are a concern, both for the government and the common people. But those who think that a strike can help bring prices down obviously have rather strange ideas of how an economy functions."

Television channels throughout 20th February showed one piece of footage – workers setting on fire a car and hurling bricks at one factory.

These are good points from which to enter the discussions. We learn that:

- Strikers are violent (rulers are evidently not)
  
- Labour laws are outdated and must be scrapped for the good of the economy, so that labour productivity is increased
  
- A strike cannot bring down prices
  
- Workers are lazy and want money without working

Between 2008 and 2011, the productivity of labour in India has gone up by 7.6 per cent. In the same period the real income of workers went down 1 per cent. The ILO's Global Wage Report 2012 shows the foregoing, and punctures the myth of "reforms" as aids to the poor. Between 1999 and 2007, the previous period, the available data suggests another 1 per cent decline in real income while labour productivity went up by 5 per cent. In other words, in twelve years (1999-2011), labour productivity increased by 12.6 per cent, while real income went down 2 per cent. The reason for presenting the data in two fragments is, it shows that the world economic crisis has not meant any change in this matter. Both before and after, workers are constantly asked to tighten the belt, while productivity has not gone down, but steeply up.

From data presented by two scholars [\[7\]](#) we find that the introduction of economic liberalism has resulted in the rise in the top 50 business houses' share in market capitalization from 32 percent in 1997 to nearly 40 percent in 2001.

In the last ten years, the share of profits in the value added has more than doubled as compared to the share of wages. This is happening in both the manufacturing and services sector where companies are using the loopholes as well as lack of implementation of labour laws to suppress wages. Companies and even the government are increasingly using contract workers to bring down wage costs and improving productivity.

The Contract Labour Regulation and Abolition Act of 1970 is therefore one that workers turn to and bosses try to flout, and are seeking to abolish as outdated. A study by Meenakshi Rajeev [\[8\]](#)

showed that among the contract workers she studied, the majority earned Rs 2000 per month.

Formally, contract workers are supposed to get Provident Fund. It is a burden for them, since a bit of their meagre salary is docked, and then, as they often change contractors, they find it difficult to retrieve the previous amount.

In addition, there are a number of unregistered contract agencies that deduct provident fund contributions from the workers but never deposit the same in the provident fund office and after a few years change the location and start the same business with a different name. There are obvious advantages of being un-registered as it enables an agency to evade taxes, in addition to avoid paying PF, ESI benefits etc. to a worker and thereby increase ones profit margin.

In the industrial sector, the Public Sector has over 50 per cent contract workers, and the private sector over 80 per cent. One survey by a government organization shows over 36 million contract workers *under licensed contractors*. The labour ministry estimates that they make up nearly 28 per cent of India's 459-million-strong workforce (this includes all categories of contract workers, and the figure in this reckoning goes up to 128 million contract workers).

The Economic Survey by the Government of India states that between 1991 and 2006, there were 870,000 jobs shed from the public sector. At the same time there has been an increase in the numbers of persons employed as 'contractors' or 'casuals', or where the precise relationship between the worker and the employer is legally uncertain, within the formal sector. Each of these developments inevitably reduces the proportion of the workforce covered by India's labour laws. Furthermore many workers engaged within the formal sector may still fall beyond the law's protection. In 2005 the total workforce of India was 457 million persons, almost 395 million of whom were engaged in the informal sector. Of those in the formal sector only about 53% were actually covered by the labour laws, the remaining 47% constituting what amounts to 'informal' employment in the otherwise 'formal' sector. Various figures are advanced, but it is estimated that well over 90% of the employed workforce falls outside the law's protection.

According to World Bank's *World Development Report 2013: Jobs*, part-time work is on the rise in India. Significantly, the number of temporary workers in the country grew more than 10 per cent in 2009 and 18 per cent in 2010. More unusual is the increase in its number of informal workers in the organised sector. The report also said that the share of informal workers in organised firms is up from 32 per cent in 2000 to 68 per cent in 2010. Various studies looking at key industries such as cement, iron, steel, cotton textile and jute, have found a high rate of contract labour ranging from 60-70%, and in some sectors, including construction industry it is as high as 80-90%.

Working class under neoliberalism may not have constantly risen up to challenge the rulers. But their sense of alienation has constantly increased. The "global factory" has meant that jobs are being restructured. Learning skills are at times irrelevant. As for women, their condition is often worse.

As far back as 1995, the Human Development Report had shown that 70 per cent of the people living below the very low definition of poverty were women. Men and women experience exploitation not identically, but in different ways, related to how patriarchy is related to capitalism. On the one hand there is a demand to draw women into wage labour directly under the domination of capital. At the same time there is a requirement to maintain the family as a unit for reproduction of labour power and to reinforce women's role in domestic labour within it. These contradictory tendencies are embodied in the organisation of labour processes such as creation of flexible shifts, part-time work, home working and so on. This does not mean that the two aspects of women's lives "as domestic workers and as wage-workers" are harmoniously related. While within the family men control the resources and are the main decision makers, outside, in the work-force hierarchy women's status is never equal to that of men. The majority of them are confined to low-paid, low-skilled and irregular labour processes. Globalisation has intensified this, and with it their alienation, in the case of a significant part of the female labour force. Gender hierarchies are reproduced in

workplaces with male owners, managers, and supervisors, and women assembly workers. Women complain of having restrictions regarding going to the toilet. There are many repeated cases of sexual harassment inside and outside the premises. Poor working conditions and long hours of work lead to occupational diseases which only means loss of job for these women. It is also this poverty and multiple pressures that lead to the ease with which violence is done to women. To cite only one recent example, three sisters, young girls aged 5, 0 and 11, were lured with offers of food, because since their father's death they had lived in extreme poverty, and raped and murdered, in Murmadi in Maharashtra. Women who work in numerous industrial sectors are constantly at risk, given the growing violence against women, and which shows that lack of security is pushing them into ever greater economic difficulties or risks.

Price rise and low wages have been major issues behind working class unrest in recent years.

Taking the Consumer Price Index for 2001 as 100, the average price, according to government sources, of selected articles for industrial workers, has risen rapidly. Data for one city, Kolkata, shows that price of rice has gone up from 13.67 per kg (2006) to 22.21 (2010). Taking the same years, we find price rise for wheat going up from 10.65 to 16.78 per kg,

Pulses (of different kinds) from between 33 to 45 rupees to between 70 and 110 per kg; cooking oil from 46-47 to 60-67 (again, different kinds), fresh fish from 91 to 157, onion from 9.58 to 28.6, soft coke from Rs 1544 per 40 kgs to 204, milk from 16.5 to 24 per litre, and so on down the line. [9]

We have used the Kolkata data, but data for all cities would show a rise. In the decade 2002-2012 prices have grown a staggering 284 per cent. Housing, health, education have become considerably more expensive. And food access is certainly the most important political issue for the toiling masses. Nutrition indicators, already among the worst in the world, have stagnated and per capita calorie consumption has actually declined. Pervasive hunger has worsened. In the past year, inflation has moved across food items, and the average inflation has been high.

The other side of prices is wages. The minimum daily wage for unskilled work in Delhi is Rs. 203 and for skilled work, it is Rs. 248, in Maharashtra the minimum wages range from Rs. 116.54 -Rs. 310.62 (in film industry), ranges from Rs. 80 - 207.42 in Tamil Nadu and Rs. 87.50 - 163.30 in West Bengal. However if one calculates the minimum wage as per the norms set by the 15th ILC and subsequent Supreme Court judgements at current average prices (on which the CPI-IW is calculated by the Labour Bureau) of the 4 metros, the daily minimum wage would be Rs. 346.42.

Minimum wages in states especially for agriculture are so low that even if workers find employment everyday in a year and are paid the minimum wage, they will not be able to fulfill the basic needs of their family specified as per the 15th Indian Labour Congress (ILC) norms and the subsequent Supreme Court judgments (Unichoy vs State of Kerala in 1961 and Reptakos Brett Vs Workmen case in 1991) that is the basis for determining the minimum wage. The Supreme Court also has on various occasions amplified the need for payment of minimum wages by stating that the minimum wage sets the lowest limit below which the wages cannot be allowed to sink in all humanity; that it has to be paid irrespective of the kind of enterprise, the extent of profits and financial condition of the enterprise; or the availability of workmen at lower wages; that non-payment of minimum wages amounts to 'forced labour' under Article 23, and that employers have no right to conduct their enterprise if they cannot pay their employees a minimum subsistence wage.

A troubling aspect about the fixation of minimum wages by the Advisory Boards is that many wages are not linked to the payment of dearness allowance so that the real wages of workers keep eroding due to inflation. Another inadequacy is that though the Minimum Wages Act requires wages to be revised every five years, this rarely happens. According to the Minimum Wages Act if wages are not revised, the existing wages should continue. This has led to greater lethargy and less justice to workers.



Statutory minimum wage can prove to be a suitable instrument for combating wage discrimination against women and workers belonging to backward castes, migrant labour, who are usually over-represented at the bottom-end of the wage scale. Ultimately, implementing statutory minimum wages also contributes to the reduction of poverty. The minimum wage is supposed to set the wage floor, instead it now sets the wage ceiling in most informal sectors of employment. The minimum wage has also become a poverty wage instead of an anti-poverty wage.

## The Demands of the Strike

These conditions determined some of the crucial demands of the strike. These were

- Living wage indexed to inflation for all
- Universal food security
- NREGA wage not to be less than minimum wage
- Raise the minimum wages to Rs. 10,000 per month
- Universal and comprehensive publicly financed healthcare system
- Equal wages for equal work for contract workers and women workers
- No to sexual harassment at workplace and mandatory sexual harassment prevention committees
- Defence and regeneration of the public sector

Most of the demands do not require further explication. Except to point out that in India, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute's 2011 Global Hunger Index, about 60 million children in India are underweight and malnourished, while 21 percent of the population as a whole general is malnourished. [\[10\]](#) A study indicates that in 2000 about 70 per cent of non-pregnant and 75 per cent of pregnant women in the age group 15-49 were malnourished. [\[11\]](#)

The NREGA has been much trumpeted by the government as the way out of poverty and attacked by rightwing writers. In fact, it is a pathetic half measure, though even so, in a country with massive unemployment, of some use. According to the scheme, one person per family will be given employment for 100 days per year. In reality, this does not happen. But to the extent people are employed under NREGA, in the countryside, there is a bargaining counter against low wages. If only, however, NREGA is paid at the rate of the government stipulated minimum wages.

One major demand of the struggle was the restoration of democratic rights for workers. Because there are periodically organised elections to parliament, state assemblies, and municipal and rural self-government bodies, it is argued that there is ample democracy in India. Certainly, for the bulk of the working class, democracy does not extend to their everyday existence. Demands included compulsory registration of trade unions in 45 days, and immediate ratification of the ILO conventions 87 and 98. ILO Convention 87 is a charter giving workers the right to form trade unions of their own choice, and without state interference. Convention 98 tries to add teeth to the right to

form unions by laying down what the law cannot do. Collective bargaining and the right to exist as human beings are thus supported by these ILO policy guidelines.

At the central level, an evident lack of gender sensitivity resulted in many women-specific demands were not highlighted. Even so simple a demand as the creation of crèches and separate toilets for women in every workplace, while very important for the women, do not find adequate space in the demands actually highlighted. But some demands have been raised. The central demands list includes, as we have seen, the demand for equal pay for equal work, as well as the demand for an end to sexual harassment at workplace. This has of course been a major problem for working women. Ever since the Bhanwari Devi case and the subsequent Vishakha judgement, sexual harassment, assault, all have come under some scrutiny, yet it is a reality that most institutions do not even now have Committees to look after issues like these, as laid down by the Vishakha judgment. [12] If women are to work as equals, sexual violence on them has to stop, and the fact that trade unions raised this demand shows their awareness, along with the callousness of owners and management even now.

Women in the trade union movement have been putting forward other demands. The demand for social security has to include maternity benefits in practice for all women, an important but difficult task, given the high proportion of unorganized and contractual women employees.

## “Strike doesn't solve problems”

This is a favourite comment of bourgeois politicians and media persons. With record economic growth of the last two decades the income inequality has doubled, ranking the country as last amongst the so-called “emerging” economies. The price hikes, restructuring of labour, privatisations and deregulation of the economy, wage freezes and other “neoliberal” policies made the lives of even those in work overwrought. At the same time, the large swathes of suburban and rural populations continued to slide into the abyss of harrowing poverty and deprivation.

Corruption scandals involving the reactionary politicians and the hue and cry over petty non-issues went on unabated. The movement around a populist demagogue, Anna Hazare, was mainly sponsored by sections of corporate capital to attack their financial and political adversaries, but above all to divert and vent steam from the seething revolt in society beneath this smog of the burgeoning chaos.

The fact is that the greed infested Indian media has been playing a pernicious role in its crusade to observe a criminal silence over the real issues afflicting the teeming millions, while constantly whipping up religious and nationalist chauvinism. However, in the wake of the general strike call issued by eleven major trade union federations, the media machines came into full sway and a torrent of negative propaganda was unleashed against the strike. The editorial of *The Telegraph*, quoted earlier, summed up their public campaign. The strike cannot succeed because the government will not accept your demands.

The fact is that although the strike might not have brought India to a total standstill, it is still one of the most significant movements of the Indian proletariat on real issues, cutting across the prejudices and divisions imposed upon the masses to detract, distort and dent their class unity. And the strike, as with 2012, was called by all eleven national federations of TUs along with a vast array of unions from specific sectors. Almost one hundred million workers joined the strike. It called for a halt to price rise, employment, minimum wages to all workers, same wage for same and similar jobs, universal social security & the creation of National Social Security Fund, end to disinvestment, along with the issues of mass scale contractisation of work, rampant violation of labour laws and onslaught on trade union rights. Such was the pressure of the workers from below that most trade union leaders and federations had to heed the strike call to sustain a semblance of credibility amongst the workers who are seething with revulsion against

their reformist and compromising policies. Even the trade union federation affiliated to the ruling Congress party, INTUC had to join the strike. Its president G. Sanjeeva Reddy, had this to say: "Our most important demand is the abolition of contract labour and a check on the uncontrolled increase in prices." Even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) affiliated unions participated.

And if we now look at the reports that have come in, as well as deconstruct the message of the mainstream media, we actually get a picture of a tremendous working class anger and upheaval.

We deliberately leave out, initially, the detailed reports from various trade unions. Instead, we are looking at data provided by 'serious' bourgeois journals like Business Standard, where the capitalists talk to themselves on economic issues.

Reporting from Odisha, *Business Standard* announced that on 20 February, the first day of the strike [\[13\]](#):

– The normal life in the state was disrupted as the vehicular traffic in most part of the state remained off roads. The bandh impacted rail services. Due to rail roko, as many as nine express trains were short terminated, one train was cancelled and two trains were rescheduled by the East Coast Railway (ECOR) authorities.

– The effect of the bandh was more prominent in industrial towns like Rourkela, Paradip, Sundergarh, Keojhar, Talcher and Angul.

– The Angul-Dhenkanal industrial hub witnessed a mixed impact of the bandh. Units of GMR Energy and Bhushan Steel were paralysed since no worker turned up for work.

– Industries in Angul including coal mines, however, reported normal operations. National Thermal Power Corporation's (NTPC) power station and National Aluminium Company's (Nalco) smelter complex functioned normally though the aluminium major recorded less attendance.

– Officials of Mahanadi Coalfields Ltd (MCL) said all the regular workers in both Talcher and Ib valley field turned up for work while most of the contractual workers stayed away from their duties.

According to another news item on the second day of the strike:

– Banking services came to a standstill and 14 million cheques worth about Rs.80,000 crore [800 billion rupees] were not processed in the last two days as clearing houses were closed. [\[14\]](#)

– Business Line reported that the strike has resulted in a revenue loss of Rs 100 crore to major ports in the country. [\[15\]](#)

– Another report stated that transport had been affected across the country. Most reports stated that West Bengal, where the CPI(M)-led Left Front had been voted out in favour of the Trinamul Congress (TMC) led by Mamata Banerjee, saw a failure of the strike. This calls for a bit of discussion.

In the first place, most newspapers insist on using the word bandh in preference to general strike, with good reason. Several Indian courts have ruled that while strikes are permitted, bandhs are not. In some cases there have even been suggestions that in case of economic damages caused by bandhs the parties who call the bandhs should be

made to pay compensation. Not for nothing are the media so keen to use the word bandh.

Secondly, in West Bengal, during its 34 year rule, the CPI(M) often enforced bandhs by using government machinery and its party cadres, and the success of bandhs was measured more often, not by how far industry was shut down, but whether employees in the government offices had turned up. While they too are part of the labouring force, white collar government employees are better off than many of the other workers. They do get pension, they get (albeit less than adequate) dearness allowance (the latest in West Bengal was paid a month back), and they are also more directly threatened under a very rightwing government. This is why, the government employee response to the strike this time was lukewarm.

But transport in Kolkata and in other parts of West Bengal was thin, and there was normally ample space in the buses, something unusual in the crowded metropolis, since many people did take part in the strike. Jute mills, teagardens, the Asansol-Durgapur industrial belt, and other places showed considerable participation in the strike.

In the transport sector, out of about 42,000 private buses and minibuses, less than 2000 were plying. It was the forced running of public sector buses that made up some of the deficit in Kolkata. Out of the 120 tea gardens in North Bengal, very few saw anything like regular work on 20 February. Banking service was completely shut down. In the Barrackpur industrial area there was considerable response to the strike, as also in the Taratala area (these are the areas to the North and South of Kolkata).

## Two Reports and a Major Breakthrough

One report made television headlines throughout 20th February, while the other was tucked away in newspapers the next day. The latter was the news that in the town of Ambala, a scab driver ran over an AITUC leader who died. The news on display was that workers in Noida had set a car on fire and had attacked factory offices. It was necessary to highlight this news for two reasons. The first was to bolster the slander that it is the strikers not the government and the bosses who use violence. Just like last year, when after the violence in Manesar, it was reported simply that workers had killed a manager, without reporting the sustained violence on the workers, including the fact that factory gates had been closed, or the casteist abuse that had been unleashed, which was what had triggered off the conflict. [\[16\]](#)

The second important reason is that Gurgaon, Manesar, Noida, are areas where the trade unions have traditionally been weak. Trying to organize unions has met with solid owner-government resistance, including massive violence, sackings, etc. These are also areas where cotractisation is high.

At Maruti Suzuki, a leading car manufacturer in India, a study by Prasenjit Bose and Sourindra Ghosh had shown, between 2007 and 2011 while MSIL workers' yearly earnings increased by 5.5 percent, the consumer price index (for the Faridabad centre, Haryana), went up by over 50 per cent. They calculated that MSIL profits after taxes have increased by 2200 percent since 2001. [\[17\]](#)

They also wrote the following:

“A comparison of the wages received by the workers of the MSIL's Gurgaon plant in 2007 and what they earn currently (wage structures at the Gurgaon and Manesar plants are similar) reveals the movement of wages over time. If a senior permanent worker at the Gurgaon plant had not taken any leave in a year, he would have earned a maximum of around Rs.2.80 lakh in 2007. Today his maximum yearly earnings would be around Rs.3 lakh, i.e., an

increase of around 5.5 per cent only. The consumer price index (for the Faridabad centre, Haryana), however, has gone up by over 50 per cent between 2007 and 2011. Therefore there has been a squeeze on the real wages of the permanent workers. In fact, the real wages of all categories of workers in MSIL have been squeezed during this period.

By contrast, the annual remuneration of MSIL's CEO has increased from Rs.47.3 lakh in 2007-08 to Rs.2.45 crore in 2010-11, an increase of 419 per cent. The annual remuneration of the Chairman of MSIL has also increased by 91.4 per cent during this period (figures are from MSIL's Annual Reports). This clearly shows the deeply skewed manner in which the benefits of rising sales and profits of MSIL have been shared between the management and the workers over the years." [18]

And this is enough to explain why, ignoring threats, workers in these areas joined in massive numbers. As a result of the unexpected support (unexpected, at least, from the side of the bosses) the strike resulted in inflicting a bigger damage on the ruling class than it had estimated. The clearest statement comes from the ASSOCHAM or The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry. In its press release, it stated, inter alia, that "Against its initial estimates of Rs 15,000-20,000 crore, the GDP may be eroded by about Rs 26,000 crore, it is apprehended based on the damaging effect of the Bandh on the industrial activity and the services sector like banking, finance". [19]

The ruling class had attempted to seal off those areas. Over three hundred FIRs had been filed and over a hundred arrested before anything had happened. Massive policing and terrorizing had taken place. It was this violence, this total lack of democratic rights, that had spilled over into violence in a few cases. And the ruling class was waiting for that. The swiftness with which its minions acted, and the rapidity with which demands were made to restore "investor confidence", showed what was at stake.

Overall the strike was massive in not just banking, which is so visible that the ruling class could not lie about it, but also in mining, post and telegraph, communications, defence, ports, and other forms of transport.

## Beyond the Strike

For the past decade and a little more, India has been held up by the economic pundits in the West, as an example of how neo-liberalism allowed a country to modernise. There has been the growth of a considerable middle class, with a rising purchasing power that translates into changing consumption patterns for the benefit of major producers. Wikipedia reported that the Indian automobile industry was the sixth largest in the world. It had an annual production of more than 3.9 million units in 2011. [20] In the same year, the number of mobile phone handsets sold touched 213 million units. [21] Sale of PCs touched 11.15 million units. [22]

What has not been reported so widely is the extremely skewed nature of that growth. The working class in India does not share the growth. After over two decades of neoliberal policies, the propaganda that only when the economy grows will workers be able to take part in that growth has worn thin. At the heart of the fight between the unions and the government is the need to ensure decent pensions versus the pension bill, which wants to tie pensions (for which workers' wages are deducted) to market driven financial instruments, to ensure greater profits for the private insurance and other finance companies. This puts workers' retirement benefits in great jeopardy.

The contradiction that exists now is between a tremendous pressure from below to fight, a pressure manifested in 100 million or more coming out though the formally organized are much smaller in number; and the inability of the traditional trade unions to wage sustained struggles. It is interesting, that while the ruling class has been trying to regain the offensive, the attitude of the trade unions linked both to the bourgeois parties and the reformist parties was

dubious. While they dubbed it “general strike”, there was no attempt to draw in a vital sector – the railway workers. There was not even any attempt to get them to go on a token strike for a couple of hours, which would have shut down trains. It is for initiatives like the NTUI to push forward and build greater links. It is also necessary for the dissident currents in the left parties, and the “far left”, to make trade union work a central part of their work. The coming together of all such forces would be able to create a pole to the left. Meanwhile, the working class struggles, despite the heroic proportions, are unable to go to the next stage. The over 450 million working class in India is still only very partially aware of its potential.

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[1] See *Radical Socialist* Kunal Chattopadhyay, [“The Fascist Upsurge”](#).

[2] See *Radical Socialist*, Kunal Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, [The Left Front and the United Progressive Alliance \(2004\)](#).

[3] See *International Viewpoint* Kunal Chattopadhyay, [“A first assessment of Indian strike - to break their haughty power”](#).

[4] See *Business Standard* [Nationwide industrial stir cripples Left-ruled states](#).

[5] See *Radical Socialist* [“Class Struggle versus Serving the Rulers and Becoming Regional Linguistic Chauvinist: The Retreat of CITU in the coming General Strike”](#).

[6] See the comments section in *Firstpost.India* [Bharat Bandh Live: Maruti Suzuki workers to join strike tomorrow](#).

[7] J. Dennis Rajakumar, ICFAI Business School, India and John S. Henley, The University of Edinburgh, UK, *Journal of Comparative International Management* 2007, V ol. 10, No.1, 3-22 [“Growth and Persistence of Large Business Groups in India”](#).

[8] [Meenakshi Rajeev, “Contract Labour Act in India: A Pragmatic View.”](#)

[9] See [“Labour Bureau Government of India Consumer Price Index \(Industrial Workers\) Base 2001=100 Statement showing the Average Monthly Prices of selected articles for Industrial Workers”](#).

[10] See IFPRI [Global Hunger Index](#).

[11] See *Economic and Political Weekly* Sunny Jose and K. Navaneetham, [“A Factsheet on Women's Malnutrition in India”](#).

[12] [See the full text of the judgment](#).

[13] [“Trade unions' strike hits normal life in Odisha”](#).

[14] See *Livemint* [“Second day of strike peaceful, but public services hit”](#).

[15] See *Business Line* [“Major ports ‘suffer Rs 100-cr loss’ as strike hits operations”](#).

[16] See *Kafila* [“Maruti Suzuki Manesar Workers – Casteist Attack and Repression”](#) and *Radical Socialist* [“Maruti Suzuki Manesar Workers: Resisting Caste Violence – Facing Brutal Repression.”](#)

[17] See *The Hindu* [“Workers' struggle in Maruti Suzuki”](#).

[18] *ibid*

[19] See Associated Chambers of Commerce of Industry of India press release "[Bandh proves more damaging to economy, losses may mount to Rs 26,000 cr., says ASSOCHAM](#)".

[20] See "[World motor vehicle production by type](#)".

[21] See NDTV "[Mobile device sales in India to reach 231 mn](#)".

[22] See *Economic Times* "

[http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-08-31/news/29949477\\_1\\_indian-pc-market-india-pc-first-tablet-computer](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-08-31/news/29949477_1_indian-pc-market-india-pc-first-tablet-computer)"  
class="spip\_url">"Indian PC market to register 11.....