



Central Organ of CPI(ML)

Liberation Central Organ of CPI(ML)

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EDITORIAL

India Must Not Become a War Manager for US Imperialism

TROOPS OUT of Iraq! Hands off Iran! While anti-war activists observed the third anniversary of US invasion and occupation of Iraq by chanting these slogans in hundreds of peace rallies the world over, the Bush brigade celebrated the anniversary by launching a renewed air attack on Iraq. The White House also used this occasion to update the US 'national security strategy', an American euphemism for Washington's manifesto for absolute American hegemony through permanent war. The NSS 2006 has Bush using many pretexts to sell his doctrine of war - from promoting freedom and democracy and igniting a new era of global economic growth to expanding the circle of development and laying the foundation for future peace. But his bottomline for the American people is that it is a one-way war which would never come back to the American soil. In Bush's arrogant words, "We fight our enemies abroad instead of waiting for them to arrive in our country."

War abroad for peace (and, of course, profit, too!) at home – this has always been America's preferred policy. In fact, the US has always believed in 'outsourcing' the real dirty work of war as much as possible. But the formula of 'war abroad for peace at home' has not always worked. The US will never really be able to erase the memories of the shocking and ignominious defeat it suffered in Vietnam and the popular backlash it produced back home. Iraq is no Vietnam, but the American 'engagement' in Iraq is clearly turning out to be immensely messier than the US possibly expected. While a deposed Saddam Hussein is using the travesty of his trial to spread his political message to the Iraqi people, the US is learning that toppling Saddam was much easier than tackling post-Saddam Iraq. Underlying the textual bravado of the NSS 2006 is the real fear of a politico-military defeat in Iraq even as Bush's domestic ratings continue to experience a free fall.

After Afghanistan and Iraq, the latest American target is Iran. The NSS 2006 says that the US "may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran" and accuses Iran of sponsoring terrorism, threatening Israel and disrupting "democracy in Iraq". The so-called nuclear concerns have thus been suitably generalized which means that even if Iran were to comply with the IAEA and UN Security Council conditions, the US would have other excuses ready to engineer a 'regime change' in Iran. Iran is however not the only target the US is adamant to pursue. Included in the same bracket are not only fellow Middle-Eastern countries

like Syria and Palestine, but countries as distant and diverse Zimbabwe and North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela.

The contours of the American discourse on terrorism are clearly expanding. True, Washington still demonises Islam as the predominant ideological source of terrorism – of course, it now accuses terrorists of exploiting, twisting and defiling a proud religion – and implicitly seeks an alliance of non-Islamic religions including "Christians, Jews, Hindus, other religious traditions" along the fault-lines of 'clashing civilisations'. But the NSS 2006 also reveals a growing American attempt to describe terrorism as a means towards 'totalitarianism and tyranny' and attribute it to 'sub-cultures of conspiracy and misinformation' – standard anti-communist tirades from the Cold War era. Every country that refuses to fall in line with the American doctrine of globalization and 'democracy' runs the risk of being branded a rogue state and identified as a deserving candidate for 'operation regime change'. Where does New Delhi figure in Washington's latest global calculations? Indian foreign policy strategists are overwhelmed with joy that George Bush cared not only to pay a visit to India but also sign a landmark Indo-US nuclear deal thereby clearly demonstrating his government's commitment to enable India to emerge as a great power. To be sure, the NSS 2006 mentions India as a 'major power' and a key partner of the US. The US sees the progress in Indo-US relationship quite compatible with improved strategic partnership with Pakistan, and the two together serving as a foundation for deeper American engagement throughout Central Asia. In particular, the US now expects India "to shoulder global obligations in cooperation with the United States in a way befitting a major power."

All those who believe that the Indo-US nuclear deal has been a great bargain for India with no tags attached are therefore clearly living in a world of wishful thinking. The deal has not only bestowed the US with a transparent insight into India's nuclear programmes and enhanced control over India's energy economy, it has also reduced India to a foreign policy tool for the US. And as far as India's own autonomy is concerned, the NSS 2006 has this statutory American warning for all US partners: "while we do not seek to dictate to other states the choices they make, we do seek to influence the calculations on which these choices are based. We also must hedge appropriately in case states choose unwisely."

If India has to escape the disastrous consequences of the strategic embrace by the US, we will indeed have to win a second war of independence. A pro-imperialist ruling clique can never be the architect or custodian of an 'independent' foreign policy.

COMMENTARY

Beyond the N-deal: India in Imperial Bandwagon

Euphoria over, it's time the nation settled down to a level-headed assessment of the backdrop and consequences of the Bush visit.

The Core Accord

How was the much-hyped nuclear deal clinched and what did India gain from it?

New Delhi's foreign policy exercises in recent years have been marked by two opposite urges or contrary pulls: (a) to grow powerful as the most obedient ally of the sole superpower and (b) to exercise multiple options and improve relations with many countries. The former did predominate, but we also saw enhanced arms purchases from France, Russia and others; improved relations and growing trade with China; and the steps, however hesitant, towards the Iran-Pakistan-India "peace pipeline". The fierce US opposition to the last-named project is well-known, and the big brother could not digest our upcoming energy understanding with China either. In January this year, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah visited Beijing, ushering in an era of increased cooperation and investment between the two countries in oil, natural gas and investment and the same month an agreement was signed in Beijing between India and China to collaborate in hydrocarbon exploration and production. This move was especially unacceptable to the US in the backdrop of developments like Venezuela and China coming closer and a euro-based Asian oil market being contemplated. Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, who was taking much interest in the China initiative, was removed from his post well before the Bush visit. That India would prefer to depend on the superpower rather than to play an active role in the emerging Asian energy gird was conveyed also by the treacherous vote against Iran in the IAEA in February. Such was the context in which the Indo-US n-deal was signed and in effect it signalled a major setback to the welcome attempts at diversification of our energy sources. (Talks on the Iran pipeline project have already fallen through, at least for now.)

What India has gained from the accord is *not* the status of a recognised nuclear power (this, by the way, also implies that the coveted permanent membership at the UN Security Council remains as elusive as ever) but only a promise of steady supply of nuclear fuel and technology from the USA. The quid pro quo is that she must open up nearly two-thirds of her nuclear facilities (deemed civilian) for strict

inspection by the IAEA, a body dominated by the USA. As US under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns pointed out in Washington, India has agreed that all future civilian reactors, whether they are thermal reactors or breeder reactors, shall be placed under international safeguards. And before the whole thing becomes operative, three additional conditions are to be met. For one, the US President must procure congressional ratification. India on her part has to negotiate with the IAEA to arrive at "India-specific safeguards" and Additional Protocol agreement and also satisfy the nuclear suppliers group (NSG) that she would faithfully follow the norms of nuclear non-proliferation. In both these forums, India will be pressured to accept stringent conditionalities including an inspection process that intrudes into our indigenous nuclear development programme. Finally, in the years to come our country will be subjected to "safeguards in perpetuity" in respect to the reactors placed on the civilian list. This means India will not be allowed to shift any reactors from the civilian to the military list as the recognised nuclear powers are entitled to do. There is thus no end to discrimination as India is rewarded for her loyalty to the big brother with second-class membership in the elite nuclear club.

The US President says, and the Indian establishment agrees, that "clean energy" from the atomic power plants will help our country improve the pace of economic growth. But the US itself meets only some 20% of its energy requirements from this source and even for oil-poor UK the figure is less than 25%. In the developing countries, China included, the contribution of nuclear power ranges between 1 to 3 per cent, and even lower. Opposition to n-power on environmental grounds is growing worldwide and in an especially accident-prone country like ours the risks involved are all the more real. There is only one gainer here: the limping nuclear power industry in the US and other industrialised countries, which will now find a ready market for their products in India. Soon after the deal, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote in a leading American daily that India is going to import about 12 nuclear reactors in the next few years, and even if just two of these orders come to America, that will mean a lot in terms of profits and jobs.

The more pertinent point is: electricity generation has always been only a secondary consideration in any country's nuclear programme – the primary purpose, right from the Hiroshima-Nagasaki days, being the production of WMDs. The n-deal will therefore mean, apart from a dangerous dependence on the US in the crucial energy sector, an escalated arms race in the subcontinent. We are already accustomed to substantial yearly increases in the 'defence' (read war) budget; now even more of taxpayers' money will flow into this account while budgetary allocations on health, education and projects like the NREGA are kept at lowest levels. Don't demand more on these accounts, the semi-starved, semi-clad

people of this country will be told, just behold and be proud: we're growing into a first-rate nuclear power, a 'strategic partner' of the world's most powerful nation!

Auxiliary agreements

Among the several other agreements signed during the Bush visit, mention must be made of the "Indo-US Knowledge Initiative on Agricultural Research and Education". Higher education and research in the two countries will now be more closely integrated and it is anybody's guess who will be in command. Agriculture will come under special focus. A governing body comprising universities, institutes and corporate houses from the two countries will be formed to carry forward research and technological cooperation in agriculture. With infamous entities like Monsanto and Wal Mart on the governing body, Indian agriculture and agribusiness are bound to be subjected to a fresh dose of MNC expropriation and control, including more stringent IPR (Intellectual Property Rights) terms.

But the formal agreements do not exhaust the purposes of the presidential visit. Hours before leaving New Delhi, Bush spoke at Purana Qila (the old fort) as CEO, America Inc. cum Commander-in-Chief, Pax Americana. India and Pakistan, he claimed, were now better off because they developed closer relations with the US and therefore urged India "to continue to lift its caps on foreign investment, to make its rules and regulations more transparent, and to continue to lower its tariffs and open its markets to American agricultural products, industrial goods and services". "Americans who come to this country will see Indian consumers buying McCurry Meals from McDonald's, home appliances from Whirlpool" – he waxed eloquent – "they will see Indian businesses buying American products like the 68 planes that Air India recently ordered from Boeing...." At the same time he called upon the "strategic ally" to help carry freedom and democracy to "the darkest corners of the earth" (read regime changes in Iran, Venezuela and elsewhere). It might be noted that the agreement also talks about India's role in the Budapest-based International Centre for Democratic Transition which helps mask Pax Americana as Pax Democratica.

Behind Bush's Benevolence

The economic benefits expected from the deal are going to be enormous, exclaims the leading lights of the Bush administration, as noted earlier. But probably more vital than the immediate economic gains are the strategic interests of US hegemonism. This will be evident from President Bush's second term National Security Strategy (NSS) released on March 16 this year. While admonishing China's leaders for "holding on to old ways of thinking and acting that exacerbate concerns throughout the region and the world" such as "continuing military

expansion in a non-transparent way" and advising them that "they cannot let their population increasingly experience the freedoms to buy, sell, and produce, while denying them the rights to assemble, speak, and worship", this document attaches enormous importance to the "transformation" of Indo-US relations, and that in a wider context:

"South and Central Asia is a region of great strategic importance where American interests and values are engaged as never before. We have made great strides in transforming America's relationship with India... India now is poised to shoulder global obligations in cooperation with the United States in a way befitting a major power."

The spirit of the NSS comes out in clear relief from the first sentence in the President's letter introducing the document – "America is at war" – and the last sentence, which reads: "America must continue to lead". A deeper treatment of America's strategic concerns and India's role in this context is available in last year's report of the National Intelligence Council, the research wing of the CIA, titled "Mapping the Global Future". The report gives us Washington's assessment of how the world situation would develop towards the year 2020. The most vital issues discussed here include: the spectacular rise of Asia under the leadership of China and India, the menace of "political Islam" and terrorism, the challenges facing globalisation and, in this complex scenario, the ways and means of preserving US hegemony over world affairs. US experts reckon that by 2020 India, like China, will catch up with or surpass individual European nations in terms of GNP (though not in per capita income or living standards), with matching military prowess. Such a market, such a state, naturally occupies a most vital place in the imperial scheme of world domination. Add to it the instinctive urge to contain China, to build a powerful base next to America's strongest potential contender in economic and military terms. Such balancing act is deemed necessary because headlong economic confrontation is rendered impracticable by US corporate reliance on China as an export platform and growing market, as well as by China's huge dollar reserves. That the Indian side endorses the US stratagem has been made clear often enough by her foreign minister as well as senior diplomats. Thus India's foreign secretary Shyam Saran said in a speech to the Confederation of Indian Industry-World Economic Forum conference in New Delhi last November: "In the context of Asia, there is no doubt that a major realignment of forces is taking place". China was emerging as a "global economic power" with significant military capabilities, he said, and added that the US and India could "contribute to creating a greater balance in Asia".

According to the NIC report, over the next 15 years or so globalisation will be subjected to many pressures and pulls, the gap between haves and have-nots will

widen considerably, and chronic instability will continue to haunt Middle East and Asia. In this backdrop, and also because of her geopolitically advantageous location at roughly the centre of Asia, India presents herself as the best possible US ally in this region.

This does not, of course, mean that Islamabad is losing its importance to Washington. By virtue of its impeccable 60-year track record of steadfast allegiance, its location on the border of Afghanistan and many other factors, Pakistan will continue to enjoy the status of most favoured nation and retain a very important place in the American scheme. President Bush has made this amply clear during his visit to that country. But, as the NSS points out in poignant terms, "America's relationship with Pakistan will not be a mirror image of our relationship with India." And this is only natural. With respect to size of market, economic growth rate and political stability, India is a far better candidate as the number one US partner in the subcontinent. Moreover, whereas Pakistan remains a hotbed of so-called Islamic terrorism, which the US dreads so much, Hindu fundamentalism and communalism in India is regarded as much less of a problem, if not actually helpful in fighting 'political Islam'.

The growing politico-military importance of India has also been repeatedly underlined by the American military establishment since September 11, 2001. The US needs a base from which the sea lanes in Indian Ocean can be put under constant surveillance. The Indian Navy has, in course of prolonged joint manoeuvres, proved that it fits the bill very well. The mass dissension and instability experienced by old allies like South Korea and Saudi Arabia also underscore the need for an alternative arrangement – preferably an "Asian NATO" in the "Asian Century". That alone, according to a recent document of the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, can effectively counter two of the biggest international security threats – an over-ambitious China and the spread of Talibanised Islam. Both under the NDA and the UPA the Indian state has amply demonstrated its willingness as well as capacity (measured by growing military muscle and also during series of joint military exercises) to play the role of a core country in such a potential formation. The n-deal, which saw the Bush administration break its own laws and invite strong criticism at home, may well prove to be a first step towards that.

Ambitions of the Regional Hegemon

The extremely flattering words Bush and his entourage showered on India before, during and after the visit – India as "a world leader" and the like – have been noticed by all observers. But the trend started right from the opening years of this

century. As China's semi-official *Outlook* magazine commented in May 2001, in order to rope in India, the US first catered to India's "psychological desire to be seen as a world power rather than a second-rate country." However, this endeavour was crowned with signal success after some five years only because it struck a sympathetic chord in the Indian ruling psyche – because the ruling classes in this country have always harboured strong expansionist or regional hegemonist aspirations.

Even before transfer of power, addressing army officers in October 1946, Nehru said that compared to China, India had greater prospects for becoming a big power. "India is likely to dominate politically and economically the Indian Ocean region",² he added. Then in 1948-49 he proposed a comprehensive military collaboration to the United States, but the response of the latter was lukewarm. Subsequent developments like aggressions on neighbours and the Bangladesh war, the annexation of Sikkim, Pokhran I and Pokhran II, the armed intervention in Sri Lanka and Bhutan, and so on are all well known.

It is in continuation and furtherance of this historic trend that the Indian rulers decided to respond positively to the post-9/11 American urge for closer relations. In fact shortly before that incident, New Delhi under the NDA went out of its way to render quick support to America's highly offensive project called "national missile defence"³ and even wanted to be a part of it. After the UPA government came to power, for the first few months it tried to maintain a posture of relatively independent foreign policy. But then the pro-US tilt began to grow more glaring and after the breakthrough accord in July last year, the recent slew of agreements was finally signed. In the months and years to come the American bear hug will no doubt tighten further in economic, political, cultural and military matters, but the Indian state will still have its own distinct agenda to pursue, generally within the overall framework of US world domination.

In sum, the N-deal epitomises a coming together of American imperial ambitions and Indian subcontinental hegemonism. Both these strands we must oppose with equal force, as enumerated in the opening pages of the present issue.

End Notes:

1 "India ready to help US in Asian power rejig", *Times of India*, 29/11/05

2 S.K. Ghosh, *The Indian Constitution and Its Review*, R.U.P.E., 2001, p. 31; citing *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 2nd series, vol.1, p. 311 and vol. 14, p. 325.

3 For details, see M. S. Venkataramani, "An elusive military relationship", *Frontline*, 9/4/99, 23/4/99, 7/5/99

FEATURE

Assembly Elections, April-May 2006:

Issues and Prospects

Assembly elections in states like Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are usually viewed as affairs of the concerned states having little connection with the pulls and counterpulls in national politics. This is primarily because of the traditional weakness of the BJP and the NDA in these states. West Bengal has been the only state with some NDA presence thanks to the Trinamul Congress (TMC), but as revealed in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections the TMC's electoral appeal has anyway been on a rapid downswing. In Tamil Nadu even the Congress remains confined to the margins, in Assam the regional AGP occupies the main opposition space while in West Bengal and Kerala the contention remains primarily an in-house affair of the UPA and its Left allies.

Despite gaining power in Bihar and Karnataka, the BJP's fortunes have not shored at all in national politics. The party remains beset with its internal ideological and organizational crisis and in certain states the biggest challenge now facing the party is to minimize the damage that Uma Bharati is threatening to make. If the party smelled an opportunity in the Varanasi blasts, its fond hopes have so far been belied by the situation on the ground. If anything, the trademark rathyatras undertaken by BJP leaders, especially Advani, have begun to yield diminishing returns and may now well turn counterproductive. Most recently, the BJP's attempt to corner the UPA government on the issue of disqualification of MPs for occupying offices of profit too seems to have backfired with Sonia Gandhi promptly resigning her twin posts and carrying the battle back into the BJP camp. It now remains to be seen if this issue has the potential to snowball into a bigger crisis and cast a shadow on the Assembly polls.

Issues like acute unemployment, agrarian crisis, and industrial closure and sickness remain major popular concerns in all these states. In addition, every state has its share of specific issues that are expected to have some impact on the election campaign, if not also some bearing on the electoral outcome. For example, Assam has witnessed major incidents of massacres of tribal people by state-sponsored militant outfits and also incidents of brutal state repression. Resentment is still running high among tea garden workers. In fact, a similar situation also obtains in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, the tea producing districts of neighbouring West Bengal.

Political violence is another major question for West Bengal. This is a tool that has long been used by the CPI(M) to protect its rural strongholds and especially to thwart any 'threat' posed by independent class assertion of the rural poor beyond the CPI(M)'s matrix of power. Of late, however, the CPI(M) too is having to pay a price and Maoist squads have killed a number of local CPI(M) leaders in the districts of Bankura and Purulia.

Issues apart, the electoral outcome is also liable to be affected by the changing pattern of political and social realignments. In West Bengal, the TMC had floated the concept of a grand alliance against the Left Front. While this has not formally materialized, chances of some kind of covert seat-sharing or mutual support cannot be ruled out. Interestingly, the TMC has succeeded in roping in a few self-styled or retired leaders of some fringe CPI(ML) groups and some of them may even contest elections as TMC-backed candidates! The biggest social realignment in West Bengal is however happening within the CPI(M). The decisive opinion within the corporate sector and the urban elite and affluent sections is turning increasingly favourable to the CPI(M), for the Left Front government has emerged as the biggest champion of neo-liberal economic policies in West Bengal. At the other end of the social spectrum, the rural poor and other toiling sections feel increasingly disillusioned and excluded and the Congress and the TMC have stepped up efforts to tap this mass resentment.

In Assam, where the Congress is generally facing an angry electorate, the only hope for the party lies in its relations with militant outfits and the split within the AGP. As opposed to a discredited Congress and a divided AGP, a united Left could have emerged as the core of a credible third force. But the CPI showed no interest in this direction and the CPI(M) too has entered primarily into a seat-sharing arrangement with one of the AGP factions while maintaining an auxiliary understanding with the CPI(ML) in a few select seats. The ASDC faction in Assam's Karbi Anglong district, which had earlier reneged on the anti-Congress anti-BJP orientation of the autonomous state movement to enter into an alliance with the BJP, is now beset with internal squabbles and dissensions and the CPI(ML) has won a new credibility and mass support for its consistent pro-people and anti-Congress political role.

Among the southern states, Tamil Nadu has witnessed an interesting crossover in the state's coalition politics with the MDMK, whose leader Vaiko had earlier been booked under POTA by Jayalalitha, ditching the DMK to cross over to the AIADMK fold. The DPI, a political platform for Dalits in Tamil Nadu, has also joined hands with the AIADMK-MDMK alliance, thereby significantly improving Jayalalitha's chances in the coming May 8 elections. In neighbouring Kerala, the CPI(M)-led LDF and Congress-led UDF have become mirror images of each other. While the Congress suffered a major split following Karunakaran's departure,

factionalism in the CPI(M) too is threatening to assume near-split proportions. Allegations of corruption against the CPI(M) have increased phenomenally with the UDF government even recommending a CBI inquiry against the CPI(M) state secretary and former LDF minister Pinarayi Vijayan in a major case of corruption. While the CPI(M) dismisses it as a politically motivated move, the fact remains that this is probably the first time the Congress has got such an opportunity to order a probe against a senior CPI(M) leader. In spite of all these problems, if the CPI(M) is still hopeful about forming an LDF government in Kerala, the hope rests on Kerala's record of alternating governments in every election and according to this trend, the Congress should lose in the forthcoming elections!

On the whole, the forthcoming Assembly elections do not promise any major political change in an overall sense. It remains to be seen if revolutionary communists are able to make some headway on the basis of their movement and mobilization at the grassroots.

Union Budget 2006-07

Hitting the *Aam Aadmi* Below the Belt

– Girish Ghildiyal

OVER THE years the expectations from the budget as a tool of affirmative policy actions have been diminishing. However, since is the 3rd straight year of a high growth phase of Indian economy, and some important assembly elections are due, it was expected that some bold initiatives for agriculture, infrastructure and social sector would be announced. Even the Congress president Sonia Gandhi had told earlier that all the priority welfare programmes launched last year "would be adequately funded". But that was not to be. The Budget was all for continuity of the policies. Care was taken not to introduce any measures that could curtail the consumption of the middle classes. The *Economic Survey* too underlined the importance of retail credit as an engine of growth.

Chidambaram's budget exercise is based on a major fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, he harps on fiscal reduction only to cut socially necessary expenditure but refuses to tax the bourgeoisie for capital gains from listed equities and dividends.

Even though, the biggest increase in allocations came for the Bharat Nirman Programme, it remains to be seen as to how much of it is really converted to the benefit of rural masses and how much is spent to cater to corporate interests in the areas like rural telecommunications, agri-business industry or retail food chains through proposed agri malls and the like.

Public sector undertakings are bleeding due to increase in international prices of crude. Oil PSUs have sustained cumulative losses of Rs.5000 crore during the current year. The government has not come up with any budgetary support to the oil PSUs, which is basically a way of keeping subsidies out of books. Cess on indigenous crude has been increased by Rs. 700/- per MT. thereby hurting profitability of ONGC/OIL. This means another round of increase in the prices of petroleum products is on the cards after the budget and after the assembly elections and the *Economic Survey* confirms as much by saying that the Rangarajan Committee Report would be implemented in three months.

Most of the promises of the National Common Minimum Programme have not been fulfilled. In fact, the budget outlay on working women's hostels has actually been cut. The budget is disappointing, as none of the suggestions made by trade unions has been accepted. The budget makes no mention of the proposed Social Security Bill for workers in the unorganised sector in India who remain severely exploited.

Agriculture

As usual there is nothing on offer to the farmers; agriculture is out of the country's economic vision. There is no place in the budget for the biggest job provider in the country, where agriculture provides nearly 600 million direct and another 200 million indirect jobs. When an unprecedented agrarian crisis prevails in the countryside and farmers' suicides continue unabated, the Finance Minister is content with only rhetoric that the focus of the government is on agriculture. A few cosmetic measures like flow of institutional credit to the farm sector at cheaper rates are hardly likely to bring relief to the sector.

Every year we hear of thrust to irrigation, credit, diversification and creation of a market for agricultural products with no corresponding effect at ground level. Farmers desperately need income support. A step up in investment in agricultural research and technology transfer may also facilitate the farmers in deriving the full benefit of the cheaper and easier availability of credit. Some concrete measures to revitalise the cooperative credit infrastructure, which has a much wider penetration in the rural areas, are badly needed. FM has only provided for a two per cent reduction in crop loan interest liability of farmers who took loans for kharif and rabi crops in 2005-06 and directed the banks to add 50 lakh more farmers for loan disbursement in the coming year, which is unlikely to make any noticeable dent on the existing farm distress.

Some steps have been announced to favour agribusiness industry. Some other steps are for expanding market for the telecom and hardware manufacturers, which will hardly resolve the crisis afflicting the farm sector. There is little on diversification. On infrastructure development there is mere talk of adopting the public-private participation approach. Budget proposals for agriculture are actually aimed at

facilitating corporatisation of farming. The *Economic Survey* calls for dismantling the minimum support price for farmers and the procurement based system of food subsidy. The FM talks of "knowledge initiative" and the supermarket giant Wal-Mart and the seed multinational Monsanto are already on board. Both the giants have already made it clear that they are not interested in sharing their technology but only in marketing their products.

Per capita food consumption has declined to dangerous levels since 1998-99 though the prices of agricultural commodities, especially the relative prices of foodgrains, have fallen much to the distress of farmers. The budget offers nothing to address this problem but the *Economic Survey* even calls for abandoning the procurement system, and thus indirectly the support prices system.

To sum up, the UPA Government's budget this year is once again nothing but an exercise to pander to the multinationals and big business lobby in the country and the newly emerging super rich upper middle class. And the *Aam Aadmi* is its worst victim once more.

[BOX]

Chidambaram's Pasta-Pepsi Budget

On Employment

ACCORDING TO the figures released in the latest issue of *Economic Survey*, the number of people employed in the private sector was 86.86 lakh in 1997. This number, instead of adding up, along with the overall growth in the economy, came down to 84.21 lakh.

Manufacturing, touted much for creating new jobs, came out rather poor as far as creating employment is concerned. As many as 52.39 lakh people were dependent on manufacturing in the private sector in 1997. Their number is down to 47.44 lakh.

The number of people employed in the public sector was 168.31 lakh in 1997 and by 2003 they were not more than 156.75 lakh.

If we take the combined figure of the public and the private sector, the number of jobs got reduced from 282.45 lakh in 1997 to 270 lakh in 2003.

The phenomenon of decline in the headcount was not restricted to the industry. The central government, state governments and even the local bodies reduced their muster roll. The Centre reduced the workforce from 32.95 lakh in 1997 to 31.33 lakh in 2003; states from 74.58 lakh to 73.67 lakh and local bodies from 22.44 lakh to 21.79 lakh.

The *Economic Survey* reported that the unemployment rate in rural areas reached 9 percent for males and 9.3 percent for females in 2004. In urban areas, it was 8.1 percent for males and 11.7 percent for females. On the UN Human Development Index, India placed 127 out of 177 countries for the third consecutive year due to poor education and health standards.

On NREG Scheme

Chidambaram has allocated only Rs.12,870 crore for rural employment (2005-07 BE) compared to Rs.11,700 crore in 2005-06 (RE), a mere 10% increase. While the much-trumpeted NREG Scheme would get Rs.10,170 crore only, much below the estimated Rs.15,000 crore needed to cover 200 districts, the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana has been cut by Rs. 4,950 crore and the National Food-for-Work programme for which Rs.4,050 crore was allotted last year has been totally abolished. In sum, despite all the fanfare about the NREG Scheme, the total allocation for rural employment has been reduced compared to the past. Moreover, it is important to note that the NREG Scheme covers only 200 districts and the rural poor in the remaining districts would be left high and dry. Moreover, the food-for-work programme is vital for drought-affected areas like Rayalaseema and Palamu and abolition of this programme means people in drought and flood-affected areas would not get any benefit under this scheme.

On Social Sector

Though the UPA Government boasts of higher economic growth, India has slipped three places to 127 in the social indicator ranking of 177 nations as noted by the *the Economic Survey* 2005-06.

On Education

Chidambaram cites increase of 31.5% allocation on education as a great achievement in increasing social sector expenditure by the UPA Government. But this is no more than peanuts. The National Common Minimum Programme promised to increase the outlay on education to 6% of the GDP and the UPA is nowhere near achieving this goal.

Total public expenditure on education during 2004-05 was only 3.47 per cent of GDP of which the Centre's and State's contributions were 0.67 per cent and 2.8 per cent of the GDP. The combined budgetary provision on education was Rs 18,337.03 crore in 2005-06 budget, which meant in actual terms reduction in the Centre's share of spending on education was around 0.58 per cent of the projected nominal GDP. In order to achieve 6 per cent of GDP spending in 2008-09, if we set a target of 4.5 per cent of GDP (estimated GDP figures for 2006-07 is Rs 35,67,384 crore) in 2006-07, this amounts to Rs 16,0532 crore to be spent both by the Centre and the States. If the states' share remains the same at 2.8 per cent of nominal GDP, the Centre's share must go up from 0.58 per cent to 1.7 per cent of

GDP - from Rs 18,337 crore to Rs 60,645 crore - in the budget to be true to its own CMP. The Centre should have allocated Rs 42,308 crore over last year's budget. But only Rs 19,816 crore has been allocated.

On Health

Even with a budgetary increase of 22% over last year's health sector allocations at Rs 12,546 for 2006-07 and additional allocations to National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) at Rs 8,207 crore, India's public expenditure on health remains around 0.6% of the GDP of Rs 39 lakh crore. The private sector expenditure formed about 80% of the total Rs 1,03,000 crore on healthcare services in 2005-06.

According to World Health Report 2005, the public expenditure for health by the India is just 21.3% of the total healthcare spends. In China, the corresponding figure was 33.7% while in the US it is 44.9%. Sri Lanka spends 48.7%, with Thailand footing a whopping 69.7%.

Government's health spends are among the lowest in the world. China spends around 2% of its GDP on health. The UK does it at 6% while the US spends around 16%. Even countries like Nepal and Bangladesh spend about 1.5% and 1.6% of their GDP on health respectively.

For Farmers

Compared to the target of 4% growth, the farm sector output is likely to grow 2.3 per cent in 2005-06 (*Economic Survey 2005-06*).

More ominously, the *Economic Survey* calls for a "A shift from the current minimum support price and public procurement system". The Manmohan Government has been importing wheat from abroad for a price higher than what it pays to our farmers. In the face of severe protests from farmers the government promised to expand procurement this year. But this promise is bound to remain a false promise as the Union Budget figures point out. The food subsidy has been slashed to Rs.24,200 crore (2006-07 BE) compared to Rs.26,200 crore in last year's budget (2005-06 BE). This shows that there is a conspiracy on the part of the UPA Government not only to cut procurement but also PDS.

Before the budget, in January, the Manmohan Singh Government decided to slash food subsidy by Rs.4,524 crore a year by reducing ration under the PDS scheme and increasing PDS prices. Due to widespread protests the decision was put on hold. Now, the budget figures reveal that the the government would go ahead with that decision after the assembly elections are over.

The Common Minimum Programme promised that farmers would be protected from cheap international market prices for agricultural commodities. The MS Swaminathan Commission on Agriculture also suggested setting up of a price stabilisation fund. But despite much hype by Chidambaram that the focus of his budget was on agriculture, this budget doesn't address this problem at all.

The CMP promised universalisation of the crop insurance scheme. The MS Swaminathan Commission on Agriculture has also recommended universalising the crop insurance scheme. But there is nothing in this budget towards that.

The UPA Government boasts of increasing credit to farmers. But the MS Swaminathan Commission on Agriculture has also suggested reduction in the interest rate for farmers to 4 per cent. But Chidambaram refused to reduce it below 7 per cent.

The Survey reveals the share of agricultural sector's capital formation in the GDP had declined from 2.2 per cent in the late 1990s to 1.7 per cent in 2004-05. This was mainly due to the stagnation or fall in public investment in irrigation, particularly since the mid-1990s. The supposedly "Pro-Farmer Budget" doesn't reverse this trend.

The post-WTO AoA disaster on the agricultural trade front continues. Regarding foreign trade of agri-products, the *Economic Survey* points out that the proportion of agri-exports to total exports dropped from 11.9 per cent in 2003-04 to 10.2 per cent in 2004-05. On the other hand, the import of agricultural and allied products in 2004-05 were estimated at \$ 3811 million, marginally higher than \$ 3708.2 million in the previous year.

Bonanza for the Upper Middle Class and the Rich

- Chidambaram slashes excise duty on small cars. The prices of small cars reduced by as much as Rs.20,000 a car.
- Excise duty on costly microwave ovens slashed.
- Ready-to eat packaged food and instant food mixes for idlis and dosas should become cheaper as duties have been reduced by half – from 16 per cent to 8 per cent.
- Excise duties have been removed completely on pasta as they have been on condensed milk.
- Duties are now zero on ice creams and aerated drinks. Bonanza for Coke and Pepsi.
- There are excise duty exemptions on DVD drives and combo drives.
- Duties on expensive shoes reduced.

Concessions to the Corporates

- The stock markets are booming. The BSE Sensex is well beyond the 10,000 mark and is now approaching 11,000. The bourgeoisie is making enormous capital gains without any effort, out of sheer stock market speculation. Yet, Mr.Chidambaram adamantly refused to increase the scope of capital gains tax.

- Chidambaram also announced the “good news” that there would be no increases in corporate taxes.
- The government is set to lose about Rs 700-800 crore in excise revenues because of the scrapping of the 8% special excise duty (SED) on small cars.
- There has been sweeping reductions to excise duties for a range of materials, parts and products required for manufacturing and service industries. In some cases, the cuts were 50 percent or more.
- Investment restrictions were eased. The limit on the purchase of government bonds by foreign investors was lifted from \$US1.75 billion to \$US2 billion. Foreign institutional investors will now be able to accumulate up to \$1.5 billion in corporate debt, up from \$500 million.
- Following an outcry by big business last year, the Fringe Benefit Tax imposed on employer payments to employees for items such as entertainment and tours has been abolished.

For Defence

This year’s Union Budget has made the biggest ever allocation to defence.

Compared to the planned increase in defence spending, the government’s “pro-poor” initiatives pale into insignificance. The combined rise for education and health spending amounts to less than half the increase in defence spending.

The defence expenditure is Rs. 83,000 crores and this is an increase of Rs. 6,000 crores or 7.7% over last year’s budgeted estimate (BE). This comes on top of a 7.8 percent increase last year and a huge 17.9 percent rise in 2004. As soon as it assumed office, the UPA Government went on a massive arms buying spree – French Scorpene submarine deal, Sukhoi and AJT (advanced jet trainer) and the aircraft carrier Gorshkov from Russia, Hawk jet trainers from Britain. Hence the capital outlay of the DE in FY 2004-05 jumped by almost 100 % from Rs 16,863 crores to Rs 33,483 crores.

India has more ambitious plans to acquire military hardware. Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Arun Prakash has said that India's Navy would acquire 27 new ships in 5 years, and "another 32 ships in 10 to 15 years." The defence establishment is also planning a major artillery purchase in 2007. Bofors once more! Purchase of 125 combat aircrafts is also on the cards. India has also agreed to buy three Phalcon airborne early warning radar systems from Israel. A whopping Rs 33,483 crore out of the total Rs 77,000 crore defence outlay will go to buy new weapon systems this year. Last year, the money allocated for defence purchases was only Rs 20,953 crore. So it is a nearly 60 percent increase. This year 374 billion rupees or over 40 percent of the increased outlay is on new military hardware.

Pakistan has expressed grave concern over India's increase military spending and arms buildup. They have warned that this would trigger off an arms race in the subcontinent. Pakistan's 2004-2005 defence budget last year was Rs 19,392 crore (compared to India's Rs 77,000 crore). Pakistan had increased the defence spending by 20 percent last year. The previous year the Pakistani defence budget was Rs 16,092 crore.

Economic Survey on Labour Market Reforms

On February 2, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh promised that the long-pending Sixth Pay Commission for central government employees would be set up. This appears to be a ruse to avoid the strike by the employees who had given a strike notice. The employees were expecting a formal announcement in the budget but their expectations were belied. Rather, the *Economic Survey* tabled by the Finance Minister P.Chidambaram on the eve of his budget clearly issued a note of caution. Even before the commission is appointed and even before it is issued the terms of reference to whom the Finance Minister was issuing the warning? To the Prime Minister!? Or, was he trying to influence the commission if it is appointed?

The *Economic Survey* says that the unorganised sector provides 'too little' security for 'too many' only to pit it against the organised sector and undercut it. The *Economic Survey* says the government may take steps to deregulate the organised labour sector. The *Survey* says that Indian labour laws are highly protective of labour but labour markets are relatively inflexible as these laws apply only to the organised sector. "Consequently, these laws have restricted labour mobility, have led to capital-intensive methods in the organised sector and adversely affected the sector's long-run demand for labour. Labour being a subject in the concurrent list, the State-level labour regulations are also an important determinant of industrial performance. Evidence suggests that states which have enacted more pro-worker regulations have lost out on industrial production in general," the *Survey* says. "The importance of reforming labour laws to enhance productivity, competitiveness, employment generation and general economic reforms hardly needs emphasis," adds the *Survey*.

Before his third budget, Chidambaram promised tax incentives to firms for having a larger employment but in his successive budgets, including the present fifth budget, the fiscal policy has not moved in that direction. The Left/TUs are also not raising this demand in the pre-budget consultations. Apart from social security measures like unemployment allowance, direct government intervention in other forms of wage subsidy, especially those that induce greater employment and choice of labour-intensive technologies, are also being demanded by the trade unions. But Chidambaram seems to be in no mood to oblige.

The budget only harps on labour law reforms to usher in a regime of ‘labour flexibility’ to suit globalisation. There is not only absence of any proposal for unemployment allowance but there is no public works programme or employment programme or, in short, labour market intervention policy, specifically addressing the problem of industrial unemployment arising due to restructuring. All government employment programmes are confined to rural areas. Sonia Gandhi informed the media that Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Bill, 2005 would be introduced in the budget session of the parliament. But Chidambaram has made no provision in his budget to constitute a fund for unorganised workers, which will become mandatory if the Bill is passed. Hence it can be assumed that the Bill will not see the light of the day at least until the next budget.

Bills on Unorganised Sector Workers: Restructuring Labour Market Legalising Informalisation

– Shankar

CONTRADICTIONARY STATEMENTS are emanating from the higher echelons of power regarding the timing of introduction of the bills on unorganized sector workers in the Parliament. Sonia Gandhi announced that the bill would be introduced in this session, only to be contradicted by the Minister of State for Labour who announced that it would be introduced only in the next session. The official Left that supports the Congress-led UPA government, has not demanded introduction of the bill in this session itself during the coordination meeting of the Left and the UPA. The final blow to the introduction of the bill is dealt by the Finance Minister Chidambaram who has not made any provision for allotment of fund for the purpose of unorganised workers social security fund which will have to become operational once the bill is passed and notified and he has thus effectively put a cap on all speculation on introduction of the bill in this session.

Informalisation, outsourcing, casualisation, contractualisation and feminisation of workforce are the strategies of capital to circumvent hard-earned labour rights and to maximize profits. The Unorganised Sector Workers’ Social Security Bill, 2005 (USWSSB) should not be misunderstood as a piece of legislation to reverse this process. Rather, Unorganised workers’ bills are proposed as effective complementary efforts in order to smoothen the process of restructuring of the labour market. The advocates of Indian capital had been worried about the mismatch between the process of liberalization and labour legislations. In their opinion, labour market conditions were more distorted owing to ‘protective’ legislations for the organized sector workers. On the other hand, 93 percent of the

unorganized sector workforce that was not covered by any meaningful legislation was a potential detonator waiting to explode any time like the growing unemployed workforce. The proposed legislation is expected to act as a dampener and to postpone any possibility of explosion of the disgruntled lot of unorganized sector workers. It is an attempt to match labour market conditions with the process of liberalization. While the unprotected and cheaper unorganised sector workers are expected to compete with the global labour, the organized workforce in the country is expected to compete with the domestic unorganized labour. Unorganised Workers' Social Security Bill, 2005 and the accompanied legislation dealing with conditions of work in unorganized sector are attempts at labour reforms in favour of capital. Labour reforms to restructure the labour market corresponding to the pace of globalisation and liberalization process is something 'inevitable' in order to resolve the so-called 'mismatch'. Legislation on Special Economic Zones that would exempt the zones from the applicability of labour laws, amendments to Industrial Disputes Act that would make retrenchments and closures – hire and fire – much easier, allowing night work for women, amendments to the PF act that would make the fund meant for the protection of workers' future vulnerable to financial market fluctuations and handing them over to private parties through Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA), newly found 'principle' of making markets to decide the wages of government employees that would guide the Sixth Pay Commission, and the proposed Unorganized Sector Workers' Social Security Bill, 2005 etc. are perfectly complementary to each other.

Increasing Inequality and Human Capital

We are a nation where 65 percent of workforce is still dependent on agriculture whose contribution to national income is steadily declining. The industrial capital has, till date, failed to absorb the surplus labour from agriculture and from rural areas. It's only the 'push' factor – not the 'pull' factor that normally accompanies industrial growth – that is mainly responsible for large-scale migration of rural work force to urban areas in search of employment. More than a decade-long implementation of globalisation and liberalization policies has resulted in the growth of gross inequality. Not only that the rich got richer, but more particularly, the poor got poorer and poorer. None of the efforts by any government of any colour had really addressed this serious and grave issue confronting the entire country. India would have added few more billionaires. But, the few could become billionaires only at the expense of millions of poor becoming further poorer and starving.

A vast unorganized sector that contributes 65 percent of the GDP, employing more than 35 percent of the total population and 93 percent of total workforce in the

country is one major distinguishing feature of Indian capitalism. The unorganized sector in our country employs around 37 crore workers and is fast expanding as a result of the liberalisation policies. A vast majority of them – 23.7 crores – is engaged in agriculture. According to the NSSO data, out of the rest, 4.1 crores work in manufacturing, 3.7 crores each in services and trade, and around 1.7 crores work in construction. Though several legislations like the Minimum Wages Act, Maternity Benefit Act, Equal Remuneration Act, Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, Building and Other Construction Workers (RE&CS) Act, Workmen’s Compensation Act, and Contract Labour Act, etc., are fully or partially applicable to the workers in the unorganized sector, none of these is being properly implemented. They do not have any job protection or social welfare benefits. Most of the workers in the unorganized sector, like home-based workers, domestic workers, hawkers and vendors, etc., are not covered by any protective legislation.

Barbara Harris White and Nandini Gooptu have rightly observed in *‘Mapping India’s World of Unorganised Labour’*, “Not only does such a strategy (of maintaining large reserves of cheap labour – Ed) entail the suppression of political and trade union rights for the majority of wage earners, and deliberate fragmentation of the labour force, but also it presumes a poorly educated, semi-literate and badly nourished mass of labourers who are constantly vulnerable to exploitation – hardly one that can sustain mass demand for the goods and services produced by a modern economy integrated into the global system. At a time when Indian employers are pressing for wholesale deregulation of the labour market, in pursuit of short-term profitability, it is clearly in the long-term interests of the economy to have a labour force with the requisite level of training and job security. This presupposes an expansion of the laws protecting and regulating labour together with large-scale public investment in what is known in development circles as ‘human capital’ (health, education, social and food security) and infrastructure (housing, sanitation, electricity and water), as well as a concerted political drive to create the social and legal conditions under which workers feel free to organize without fear of reprisal or caste atrocities”.

USWSSB:

Conditions of Employment and Social Security are Inseparable

The Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Bill is being framed now, on the one hand, because of the pressure from the working class movement and on the other hand, because Indian bourgeoisie cannot continue in the same old fashion in order to face the competitive global market scenario. It was born primarily out of the need of the bourgeoisie to restructure the labour market in tune with the liberalization policies. Labour being cheaper and unorganized is a symptom of

great hurdle in achieving higher level of efficiency and increased level of productivity. Attaining some degree of organized nature while maintaining a largely and basically unorganized character of the workforce and throwing some crumbs at them, in fact, facilitates expansion and growth of the capital. This is also a pattern through which capital seeks to strengthen and stabilize its own markets.

There are more than 3 versions of the bill in circulation. These Bills have been prepared, on the one hand, by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) and, on the other hand, by the National Advisory Council (NAC) chaired by Sonia Gandhi. Perhaps, opinions are invited on the draft by the NAC, called 'Unorganised Sector Workers' Social Security Bill, 2005'. But, this bill focuses only on social security aspect of the legislation and not on the conditions of employment. In that sense, it is not so comprehensive. Whereas NCEUS has drafted two bills, one on social security and another on conditions of employment, called 'Unorganised Sector Workers (Conditions of Work & Livelihood Promotion) Act, 2005'. There cannot be any bill for unorganized sector workers that will deal only with either of these two aspects – conditions of employment or social security. Either these two bills should go together or a comprehensive one involving all aspects of unorganized sector workers' livelihood should be redrafted. Moreover, the government should also clear the confusions regarding the bills that are to be introduced in the parliament and whether they will enact a separate comprehensive legislation for agrarian labourers or not. As on date, there is no such proposal but for some media reports that mistake NCEUS draft for a draft bill for agrarian labourers.

Some major aspects of the Social Security Bill by NAC:

Social Security: Taxing the Unorganised

Parting a rupee a day from out of the swindled surplus is not a great thing for the Indian bourgeoisie if one look at the proportion of the profit that accrues to them by exploiting the very same workers of the unorganized sector. The moot point is that the entire cost of social security of the workforce is not bestowed on the employers, but only a part of it, to be precise, only a miniscule part of it; it is being proposed to be collected as cess or tax from the employers while a large part of the cost comes from people's money in the guise of government contribution. The worker, the employer and the governments – central and the state – are to pay Re.1 each so as to accumulate a yearly sum of Rs.1095 in each account. The central and state governments are to share at the ratio of 3:1 while the government will also contribute the share of the employer where the employer is not identifiable and also the share of the worker where worker is from a BPL household.

Perhaps, the unorganized worker is being taxed, for the first time, for being a worker. But, it is being projected as if it is very much justified as the worker is

getting the benefit. Social security is not a benefit scheme but a contributory scheme. The worker is to pay Re.1 a day throughout the year. Ironically, one does not know if the worker's employment is guaranteed all through the year. Still, irrespective of whether one is getting a job throughout the year or not, one is bound to pay Re.1 a day throughout the year for the intended social security benefit. The bill is maintaining a grave silence over the issue of job security.

It also says that if the worker fails to continuously pay the contribution for about one year, then the account will become invalid unless valid and reasonable grounds are cited. Expecting an unorganized sector worker to pay Re.1 a day in an organized manner is totally unreasonable. On the other hand, we also have instances like construction labour welfare board membership where it is sufficient for a worker to pay Rs.25 during enrolment and Rs.10 for renewal. It is a simpler system and affordable money that can really work. Instead, expecting Rs.365 a year from an unorganized worker, who neither has a job security nor a regular flow of income, is a tall order. This may discourage, instead of encouraging the worker to become part of the scheme. Simpler way is to design the scheme as a benefit scheme, in place of contributory one and to make workers' contribution a small amount of one time or intermittent payment. Moreover, the worker should be allowed to revive one's account even if it is discontinued at any point of time for whatever reasons. But, the same bill has not come up with any penal provisions for employers who would not comply with the provisions of the act.

Allot 3% of GDP

The financial implications of the proposed social security scheme for all the 30 crore workers would be to the tune of Rs. 32,850 crore, of which the Union Government's share would be Rs. 17,548 crore and that of the State Government Rs. 5,010 crore. This adds up to a total of Rs. 22,558 crore, which is equivalent to 0.8 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2004-05. Taking into account administrative expenses as well as expenses for capacity building and related activities, the upper limit of the public outlay for the scheme would not exceed one per cent of the GDP. But, the social security outlay for unorganized sector should be pegged at a minimum of 3 percent. The government extends the coverage of social security for six lakhs workers in the first year and extends it to 30 lakhs within a period of five years like the NREGA. But, anything is possible only when any scheme is backed by the requisite level of funds. Talking so much about social security without even allocating 3 percent of the GDP can only be a mirage.

Ambiguous Definition

The definition of unorganised sector worker, according to the bill "means a person who works for wages or income; directly or through any agency or contractor; or

who works on his own or her own account or is self-employed; in any place of work including his or her home, field or any public place; and who is not availing of benefits under the ESIC Act and the P.F Act, individual insurance and pension schemes of LIC, private insurance companies, or other benefits as decided by the Authority from time to time”. This definition needs further clarification because many workers, for example contract workers in hazardous occupations, who might avail ESI benefits, may not get any other benefits like PF or insurance. But, the bill puts a blanket ban on the entry of workers under the purview of the bill who avail either of these benefits. The categorization of unorganized workers as wage earners and self-employed workers needs to be qualified. For example, a worker might be working under numerous employers and at the same time, one may not be a self-employed but a wage earner. In this case, the bill should find effective method to identify the employers and put the onus of responsibility on the employer.

Toothless Workers’ Representation

National Social Security Authority for the unorganized sector workers is represented by its executive office and the powers are vested with these officials. The proposed supervisory board that comprises workers’ representatives is a toothless body that would not have any power or authority over the officials. They can only suggest, advise or receive reports from the Managing Director of the executive office. The bill has proposed appointment of a special committee by the central government to recommend resolution in case of discord between the executive office and the supervisory board. One can be sure that it cannot be an adhoc one as the discords between these two bodies cannot be expected to be occasional given the nature and interests these two bodies are supposed to represent. To be brief, actual authority is vested with the executive office that would represent the employers as we have been witnessing in case of labour offices throughout the country and the supervisory body that would have workers’ representation, albeit in a minority, will be an ornamental one, sitting tight as a mute spectator. Moreover, the bill also provides legal immunity to the authority and jurisdiction of any civil court over the authority is barred. The worker for whom the whole project is being visualized or any citizen of public concern should have access to legal remedies if any wrong or mistake is committed by the authorities. In a democracy, no one can be above the law. These anomalies should be rectified in the present bill.

On the Bill on Conditions of Work & Livelihood Promotion: Conditions of Employment or Conditions of Employers

This bill prepared by NCEUS has two parts – one dealing with conditions of work for the unorganized agricultural and non-agricultural workers and another part that

deals with livelihood promotion for the self-employed. The first part is further divided into Part A&B that deal with conditions of work of the agricultural wage workers and the non-agricultural wage workers. Both are almost the same but for the usage of sub-titles 'agricultural' and 'non-agricultural'. In that sense, it has not taken care of particularities of each category. Moreover, in a country like India where more than 65 percent of workforce is still dependent on agriculture, trying to include agrarian labourers in a general category of 'unorganised workers' is not doing justice to the toiling rural masses. Recognising differences in conditions of employment in the agricultural and non-agricultural sector should be the point of departure for any meaningful legislation. Nothing else can be an effective replacement for a comprehensive legislation for agrarian labourers. The UPA government should pay urgent attention to this demand of the people's movement.

Farce Called Penal Provisions

The UPA government has not at all given any serious thought over the most important aspect in the legislation for unorganised workers that deal with the conditions of employment. The bill does not have any stringent penal provision for employers who contravene the provisions of the bill, but for some soft approach of laying down a penalty of a maximum of Rs.5000/, which is nothing in today's world. Even Food Security Bill has proposed a penalty of Rs.1 lakh while the bill for labour is not prepared to go beyond Rs.5000. The bill makes itself a laughing stock when it equates a penalty that extends upto Rs.5000/ to the imprisonment that extends upto one year mentioned in the Food Security Bill. The track record of labour legislations that include similar provisions have never seen any employer arrested in the whole country for violating labour laws while workers are arrested and severely punished for exercising their legal rights. Penal provisions cannot carry any meaning unless they are much stringent on employers who violate the law.

Fix the Principal Employer

Another important point that does not find a place is the question of 'principal employer'. There is a whole lot of manufacturing operations that are being outsourced and the labour force is being informalised in the era of globalisation. Many big corporate houses engage only in trading having their own trademarks, etc. In such cases of outsourcing, ancillarisation, etc., the principal employer – irrespective of whether one is a manufacturer or a trader – should be held responsible for maintaining the working conditions as well as for paying the social security benefits to the workers.

It is appreciable that the onus of responsibility of proof of compliance with the provisions of the act lies with the employer instead of the employee unlike the

Indian Evidence Act. But, at the same time, the criteria for fixing the employer who mostly operates with no records in the unorganized sector and the responsibility for fixing the same should be clarified in the bill. Otherwise, it will be a big loophole for the employers who habitually engage in unfair labour practices.

Sexual Harassment

The bill does mention about sexual harassment at work places but is not prepared to extend the legislation to ban sexual harassment and no stringent penal provision is proposed for the purpose. The guidelines issued by the Supreme Court in Vishaka case should be made part of the bill. The Sexual Harassment Prevention Bill should be extended to unorganized sector as well.

Enforcement Abandoned

The bill says that no employer shall employ a worker in contravention to the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, Child Labour (Prohibitions and Regulation) Act, 1986, The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, and Minimum Wages Act, 1948. But, the bill does not talk about the income security and job security. The bill does not have anything to offer for the workers who are thrown out of job as and when they form a trade union or become members of a trade union. The bill does not provide any protection against retrenchment or dismissal or winding up of operations and does not have anything to offer as compensation in case of extreme, genuine cases of unemployment. The bill does not talk about recognition of trade union by the employer.

A vast majority of workers in unorganized sector, like textiles that are even export oriented and even cater to the international markets, are languishing in semi-bonded conditions of employment, in spite of the so-called act that abolishes bonded labour system. No unorganized sector worker is getting minimum wages as per the act. No worker is getting legally due double wages in case of working overtime beyond stipulated eight hours of work. The bill is conspicuously silent about enforcement of existing legislations. No employer in unorganised sector is seen to be reaching the negotiating table for resolving any problem. Workers have no other option but to articulate their genuine demands by making it a law and order issue. Even, beedi workers, having exclusive protective legislation for them, have to resort only to such methods of struggle in order to get their grievances redressed. Beedi employers evade Gratuity Act by reducing the work in the last 12 weeks that is counted for computing gratuity of a worker due to be retired. The bill

does not talk about any foolproof enforcement machinery. Enforcement machinery can become effective only when penal provisions are stringent.

The unorganized sector workers should also be extended the benefits under other industrial legislations like Industrial Disputes Act, Trade Union Act, Payment of Wages Act, Equal Remuneration Act, Workmen's Compensation Act, Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, Maternity Benefit Act, Employees' Provident Fund Act, Employees State Insurance Act etc. The applicability and coverage under these legislations should be made universal.

Disputed Justice

The bill has proposed 'Dispute Resolution Council' vested with the powers of a civil court to be constituted in each district, which will play the role of conciliation machinery. In case of failure, the Council itself will forward the complaint to the appropriate authority for adjudication. This mechanism is totally inadequate to address the grave issues confronted by the unorganized sector workers. The bill should give more thought to make the dispute resolution mechanism more effective. Otherwise, poor unorganized workers languishing at the gates of courts for years expecting justice to be rendered cannot be ruled out.

Promotion of Livelihood of the Self-Employed

The bill has suggested provision of credit, access to banking institutions, right over common property and natural resources, right to share public space to engage in economic activities, more concern for street vendors and hawkers in city and rural development planning, etc. But, it has not offered anything in concrete but for expressing its wishes. It is not possible to make it a practical plan unless and otherwise the vision is inked to a concrete plan. The bill has to go a long way in this regard. The Centre for Civil Society (CCS) has made a quite a lot of useful comments in this regard.

In Lieu of Conclusion

As Barbara rightly observed, both employers and government authorities are currently working on the short-sighted assumption that India's comparative advantage lies in the undisputedly low cost of labour. Unfortunately, what they do not understand is that large reserves of cheap labour cannot constitute the foundations of a modern, globally competitive economy.

BOX

Salient Points of the Draft Bill Proposed by the NAC

- A wage earner or a self employed who are not availing benefits under ESIC Act and PF Act and individual insurance and pension schemes of LIC, private insurance companies, or other benefits as decided by the Authority from time to time, will be covered under the purview of the act.
- Every unorganized sector worker as defined in 2 (o) who has completed eighteen years of age shall on the payment of prescribed fee become eligible for registration as a member and for the purpose, get a Unique Identification Social Security Number and identity card under this Act. No worker shall be eligible for getting more than one social security number. Worker shall be registered as a member once and this registration shall be periodically renewed and updated as decided by the Authority. The NCEUS adds an additional qualification of a monthly earning less than Rs.5000/.
- Workers by registering themselves with the government through Workers Facilitation Centres, would be given an Identity Card and a ‘Unique Identification Social Security Number’ that will remain with the worker for the whole life. This number will not change even in case of migration, rather that it would become the identity of the worker wherever he finds a job in the country.
- Workers Facilitation Centres are to be opened, at least, one in each district. Workers Facilitations Centres are empowered to undertake various activities including opening of employment exchanges and skill upgradation training centres.
- Self-Help Groups or their Associations, (ii) Post offices, (iii) All types of Co-operative societies, (iv) Micro-Finance Institutions, (v) Trade Unions, (vi) District Panchayat, (vii) Village Panchayat, (viii) Existing Welfare Boards, (ix) Urban local body, (x) Any other organization or agency dealing directly with unorganized workers, etc., – may be appointed as Facilitating Agencies by the Authority. Facilitating Agencies, in turn, would set up, maintain and run the functions of the Workers Facilitation Centres.
- All registered workers are entitled to a floor level scheme shall include (i) health, life and permanent disability insurance; and maternity benefits without contribution from the member, and (ii) a contributory old-age benefit scheme including pension. Apart from that the Authority may also notify the schemes as under, subject to sustainability of the Fund: Medical Care or sickness benefit scheme, (b) Employment injury benefit scheme, (c) Maternity benefit scheme, (d) Old-age benefit including pension, (e) Survivor’s benefit scheme, (f) Integrated Insurance Scheme, (g) Schemes for

- Conservation of natural resources on which workers depend for livelihood, (h) Housing schemes, (i) Educational schemes, (j) Any other schemes to enhance the quality of life of the unorganized worker or her family.
- Levy and collection of cess, tax or fees, grants and loans made to the Authority by the Union or State government, contributions made by the members and employers, donations, income generated by registration of member, etc., will be the sources of the welfare fund that would be operated by the authority.

SPECIAL REPORT

The Bush Visit and After: Battle Lines have been Redrawn

PREDICTABLY ENOUGH, Indian advocates of a strategic partnership with the US have begun to describe Bush's just concluded maiden visit to India and the Indo-US nuclear deal as a huge diplomatic breakthrough for India's foreign policy. With Bush ruling out the possibility of a similar nuclear deal with Pakistan, there is an obvious element of additional glee in this camp. America's relationship with India, they argue, has now entered a qualitatively new phase - it is now a really special and exclusive relationship. And what better international role can India really cherish than being identified as the most trusted American partner in Asia! So never mind if Manmohan Singh had to throw all diplomatic protocols to the winds to personally rush to the airport to be patted patronisingly on the back by the US President and, if unconfirmed media reports are to be believed, also to be frisked by US security agencies.

The nuclear deal, the much talked about centrepiece of the Bush visit, supposedly recognises India as a nuclear power and entitles her to receive nuclear fuel and technology from the US and other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group in lieu of India's commitment to abide by the norms and requirements of 'nuclear non-proliferation'. While the deal is yet to be ratified by the US Congress and the details of the so-called 'India-specific safeguards' are yet to be worked out, India's nuclear programme now clearly stands subjected to an international inspections regime and legally binding eternal and intrusive safeguards. Contrary to Manmohan Singh's solemn assurance to Parliament last July 29 to acquire the same rights and benefits as the other nuclear powers and never accept discrimination, the deal has signalled an end to India's long phase of nuclear untouchability only to grant her second-class citizenship in the nuclear world.

The nuclear deal is full of both military and civilian implications. Militarily, it is bound to trigger a disastrous arms race in the subcontinent and the size of India's

so-called 'minimum nuclear deterrent' will steadily go up. The enormous costs of this escalating arms race will obviously have to be shouldered by the common Indian people who would be called upon to sacrifice more and more of their basic needs and rights for 'national security'. The nuclear deal also marks a major shift in India's energy matrix in favour of nuclear energy which Bush has described as the 'cleanest and most reliable way' of meeting India's energy needs. This means India will be 'encouraged' to rely more on nuclear energy, to be generated increasingly by imported reactors dependent on imported fuel, and 'dissuaded' from exploring alternative channels of energy supply like the gas pipeline from Iran or cooperation with China in the international oil market. In other words, the deal promises to revive the decrepit US nuclear power industry while thwarting India's energy independence.

Meanwhile, Bush has been pretty blunt in listing the 'other responsibilities' that India will have to discharge. In his Purana Qila address, he has categorically asked India not only "to continue to lift its caps on foreign investment, to make its rules and regulations more transparent, and to continue to lower its tariffs and open its markets to American agricultural products, industrial goods and services" but also to stand by the US in opening up global markets and carrying freedom and democracy to "the darkest corners of the earth". In other words, the US wants India both as an unfettered market as well as a loyal ally in its 'mission' to engineer regime change in any country that may dare oppose American hegemony. Whether it is in relation to China or North Korea, Iran or Syria, Venezuela or Cuba, India will now have to toe the US line without fail. Indeed, what else could an unequal strategic partnership possibly mean?

In stark contrast to the euphoria of the ruling elite and the mainstream media, the people of India hit the streets in large numbers to express their anger and opposition. They are angry with Bush and his worldwide war on democracy, progress and humanity, and fuelling this anger is the Indian rulers' policy of spineless capitulation to the American drive for global hegemony. Many of the parties 'sponsoring' these protests may well be accused of being highly inconsistent and even hypocritical in their anti-imperialism, but the scale and intensity of the protests indicated a veritable countrywide outrage against imperialist domination, a popular Indian outcry for national dignity, independence and anti-imperialist internationalism. One of the most heartening features of the protests was the mass participation of the Muslim community and the prospect of growing political proximity between the communist movement and the Muslim masses. Indeed, in the Indian people's spirited opposition to US imperialism we have the basis of a new, necessary and vibrant Indian nationalism. Communal forces and the Indian state will of course do all they can to disrupt this militant secular anti-imperialist unity of the Indian people. We have already seen such derailment attempts in

Lucknow and anti-imperialist forces must act promptly to foil such communal designs. The Bush visit has done its bit in terms of redrawing the battle lines both inside India and in the international arena, and the challenge now is to intensify the battle and carry it forward to victory.

Protests against Bush visit

CPI(ML) ORGANISED nationwide protests on February 2 against the visit of George Bush, the chief of the American war machine and imperialist pirate brigade. Various programmes were held at different centres in the country with the slogan 'Killer Bush, Go Back'. Through these protests the Party condemned the UPA Govt.'s spineless surrender before the US imperialism endangering country's sovereignty.

In New Delhi, various left and democratic parties and organisations held a massive protest march and rally from Ramlila Maidan to Jantar Mantar. Addressing the mammoth Anti-Bush rally in Parliament Street, the CPI(ML) General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya called upon the patriotic people of India to rise with the spirit of progressive nationalism of Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh against the so-called 'enlightened nationalism' of Manmohan Singh, which is nothing but an euphemism for naked surrender to the US imperialism. He said that recent statements of US ambassadors in India as well as Nepal were statements of 'Viceroys' rather than ambassadors. He made a fervent appeal to strongly combat the capitulationist policies of the UPA Government. Taking strong exception to Manmohan Singh's statement that people criticising India's vote with the US in IAEA against Iran were indulging in minority appeasement, Com. Dipankar remarked that Manmohan Singh was speaking in Advani's language. He strongly condemned the US support to the autocratic monarchy of Nepal. He said that Kashmir issue should be resolved by India, Pakistan and the people of Kashmir rather than by the US dictating terms to the two governments.

Comrade Dipankar said that the Bush visit also marks an intensification of US intervention in India and South Asia. India's nuclear programmes and the entire energy economy is being mortgaged to the US while US interference in Nepal, Kashmir and various other aspects of Indo-Pak relations is also on the increase. He called upon the people to foil this ugly American design and categorically reject the growing pro-US tilt in the UPA government's policies.

Militant protests were also held in almost all the state capitals and important centres in the country including Patna, Ranchi, Lucknow, Dehradun, Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Kakinada, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Guwahati and Pondicherry etc. While the protests were organised in Bihar in all the district headquarters, a massive protest was held in Ranchi and other centres, including

Ramgarh, Hazaribagh, Daltonganj, Latehar, Garhwa, Panki, Giridih, Bagodar, Rajdhanwar, Saria, Bokaro, Dhanbad, Jamshedpur, Koderma, Gumla, Lohardagga, Debgar, Dumka, etc., of Jharkhand where effigies of George Bush were burnt in a large number. In Lucknow, an effigy of Bush was burnt in front of UP Assembly. In Uttaranchal, protests were also held in Haldwani, Rudrapur, Shrinagar and Gauchar towns.

In Chennai, a joint rally was held by the left parties and it was addressed by Comrade AS Kumar and a convention was organised in Tiruvottiyur. Protest demonstrations were also held in Tirunelveli, Namakkal, Karur, Tuticorin, Virudunagar, Madurai, Cuddalore, Sirkazhi districts. Police arrested CPI(ML) activists in Tirunelveli. In Assam, protest programmes were held in different places on 2 March. In Guwahati a protest march was held at main area of Panbazar. A joint programme with other left and democratic parties was also held at Guwahati which was addressed by Comrade Rubul Sarma. Similar programmes were also held at Dibrugarh, Jorhat, and Biswanath Chariali. Rajasthan witnessed protests in Jhunjhunu and Udaipur and also a joint protest at Banswara. A demonstration was also held in Mansa of Punjab. Massive protests were held in Kolkata on the eve of Bush arrival on 1 March.

Hyderabad, where Bush spent his second day in India, saw a big protest rally by all left and democratic parties and Comrade N Murthy addressed it. Comrades Bugata Bangar Rao addressed the joint left rally in Kakinada and Comrade Nagmani addressed the joint rally in Vijayawada. Earlier the left parties organised a joint convention in Hyderabad to prepare for protests during the Bush visit and Comrade Murthy spoke in that convention. The left parties organised a popular campaign from February 27 onwards in which several democratic personalities participated. "Killer Bush Go Back" demonstration was held on March 2, 2006 at Pondicherry near Rajiv Gandhi Square where a picture of imperialist Bush was burnt for which the participants were arrested by Dhanvandri Nagar Police. Under the leadership CPI-ML State Committee Member Com.G.Jaganadhan hundreds of members of CPIML, AICCTU, AIPWA, AISA, RYA and AIALA participated.

REPORT

Assembly March in Chandigarh against murderous assault on AIALA Leader Com. Bant Singh

A MILITANT march, in protest against the murderous assault on AIALA leader Com. Bant Singh was organised in Chandigarh on March 3 demanding arrest of

Congress Sarpanch of Jhabbar village, the main conspirator, and action against SHO of Joga Police Station. More than 5000 agricultural labourers, brick-kiln workers and other rural and industrial workers participated in the programme.

Com. Bant Singh who was brought from hospital to attend the programme, raised his remaining hand, amputated below elbow, as red salute, the whole meeting resounded with full throated revolutionary songs. He also sang two revolutionary songs epitomising the death-defying spirit of the Indian agricultural proletariat.

Com. Gursharan Singh delivered a powerful, spirited speech on this occasion. After the meeting, a militant rally was taken out towards the Assembly which was stopped by police at Matka Chowk. Sensing the militant mood of the masses, the govt. was forced to send OSD to Chief Minister to the Matka Chowk to receive the memorandum. The Punjab Govt. was warned that if demands were not fulfilled by 10 March, the movement would be intensified further. The protest meeting was addressed by Comrades Srilata Swaminathan, President of AIPWA, Swapan Mukerjee, General Secretary of AICCTU, Raja Ram Singh, Convenor, All India Kisan Coordination Committee, AIALA National Executive Member Bhagwant Samaon and Tarsem Jodha, leader of Brick Kiln Workers' Union and others.

Protest at the Indian High Commission in London

COINCIDING WITH the protest held in Chandigarh on 3 March, a protest was organised in London at India House, The Aldwych, at the initiative of South Asia Solidarity Group. A letter was sent to the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, through the Indian High Commission, urging him to take action. Protesters demanded an independent inquiry into the incident to ascertain whether the Punjab government is shielding powerful people involved in planning the attack due to their affiliation with the ruling Congress Party. The letter said, "We are deeply concerned by the attempts by senior police officials to dismiss any link between the attacks on Bant Singh and his courageous struggle against those who raped his minor daughter in 2002. The successful sentencing of the rapists to life imprisonment by a Sessions Court in 2004 is a very strong motive for the repeated assaults by upper caste men on Bant Singh over the past year, and must not be swept aside as irrelevant to the case." The letter has been endorsed online by 600 individuals including Jeremy Corbyn MP, John McDonnell MP, Chairperson, Punjabis in Britain All-Party Parliamentary Group, Kalpana Wilson, South Asia Solidarity Group, Avtar Jouhal, General Secretary, Indian Workers Association (GB), Iqbal Singh, Punjab Human Rights Internet, Ramesh Klair, Sri Guru Ravidass International Organization for Human Rights, Sarbjit Johal, Asian Women Unite, David Haslam, Chairperson, Dalit Solidarity Network, Aisha Gill, Chairperson, Newham Asian Women's Project, Amrit Wilson, Chairperson,

Imkaan Asian women's refugee network, Pardeep Singh Rai, DEEP (Defenders of the Environment and Ecology of Punjab). An online petition was launched at <http://new.petitiononline.com/Bant06/petition.html> in support of Bant Singh.

Massive CPI(ML) Rally in front of State Assembly in Bhuvaneshwar

On March 9, CPI(ML) Orissa State Committee organised a '*Mahasamabesh*' of tribals, fisherfolk, poor peasants and dalit agricultural labourers at Bhuvaneshwar in front of the state assembly. In this militant rally, tribals from Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, especially the eviction victims, participated in thousands. They were raising slogans for distribution of ceiling-surplus land and benami lands of the landlords among the landless and poor peasants, for reducing the land ceiling through progressive land reform legislation in a short period of time, for stopping the eviction drive at the behest of MNCs and Indian monopoly houses including Vedanta, Tatas, Jindal and Posco, looting the rich mineral deposits. They expressed their solidarity with Kalinga Nagar people.

Similarly, thousands of Chilka fishermen joined the Maharally, demanding withdrawal of anti-fisherfolk Chilka Bill and driving out the prawn mafia from Chilka immediately. More than 10 thousand people attended the *Mahasamabesh*. The *Mahasamabesh* concluded with a clarion call for a united and coordinated, powerful and joint movement against all these anti-people and pro-imperialist policies of the governments. CPI(ML) General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya was the main speaker. Among other prominent speakers were Kshitish Biswal, Orissa State Secretary, Raja Ram, Gunni Oraon and Anant Gupta from Jharkhand, Bangar Rao, CC member and AIALA National Secretary, Tirupati Gomango, tribal youth leader of Orissa, Radha Kant Sethi, ex.-MLA and Orissa State Committee member, Satyabadi Behra, President of Orissa unit of AIALA, Bidyadhar Patro, AIALA Orissa State Secretary, Sabita Baraj, AIPWA State Secretary Orissa, Meghanada Sabar, President, Chilka Matsyajeebi Mahasangh, Balram Das and Bibhuti Behra, Vice President Chilka Harijan Matsyajeebi Sangh.

Vidhan Sabha Chalo in Ranchi

A Vidhan Sabha march was organised by the CPI(ML) in Ranchi on March 20, at the conclusion of its month-long campaign for the implementation of the NREGA, and to press for the demand of the arrest of the killers of Comrade Mahendra Singh along with some other demands. The march was led and addressed by CPI(ML) General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya. The following resolutions, among others, were passed by the People's Assembly, held at the

conclusion of the march: 1) This assembly of the people condemns the governmental callousness and administrative high-handedness in implementation of the NREGA and demands immediate distribution of Job Cards under this scheme. If this demand is not fulfilled, the CPI(ML) will organise a state-wide Protest Day on March 31 in the state; 2) This meeting condemns the continuing attacks by the state government on the rights of the tribals and demand to hold Panchayat Elections in whole of the state. These elections must be held under PESA Act in the Scheduled Areas; 3) This meeting believes that signing of number of MOUs, one after another, by the state government without taking elected representatives into confidence is a conspiracy on the people of the state, and demands the cancellation of all MOUs signed by the state govt. so far; and 4) This meeting condemns the planned attacks on religious minorities by the communal forces under government protection and demands the arrest of the killers of Father Ignesh Bara as well as to stop the conspiracy to bring in the anti-conversion bill.

Communal designs of RSS-BJP given a fitting rebuff in Uttar Pradesh

Political turmoil in U.P. is bound to gain momentum with the approaching assembly elections, to be held, latest by the beginning of 2007. And one can safely predict that the tremors of upheaval in UP will be felt in New Delhi, too.

Mulayam Singh is facing one setback after another. Recently, the Allahabad High Court declared illegal the defection of 40 BSP MLAs to SP and thus, by implication, questioned the very formation of the Mulayam government. But Mulayam Singh, instead of conceding to this judicial disapproval of his patently undemocratic act, shamelessly sought a vote of confidence and 'proved' his majority where these MLAs voted in his favour. In yet another setback, his Party MP from Rajya Sabha, Jaya Bachchan was disqualified by the President on the recommendation of the Election Commission, for holding an office of profit, a charge which may equally apply to his lieutenant Amar Singh as well. More importantly, popular disenchantment with the government is increasing with every passing day.

Mulayam Singh is a desperate man today. It was in this backdrop that the rioters were given a free hand in Mau and a prolonged communal build-up by BJP was allowed in Varanasi, centering around the killing of its MLA in a gang-war. Then came the Lucknow tragedy, costing four innocent lives. Historically, Lucknow has seldom witnessed Hindu-Muslim riots. It was really intriguing to see that Lucknow became the only city to be engulfed by a communal flare-up during anti-Bush protests. And finally, the attempts for communal polarization utilising Varanasi

blasts, were given a fitting rebuff by powerful intervention of democratic forces like the CPI(ML).

Braving unexpected rain and a communally surcharged atmosphere, thousands gathered at the Commissioner's office in Varanasi to mark the culmination of the first phase of the 'Right to Employment (RTE)' campaign which began on 23rd Feb. '06 from Babhni block of Sonebhadra and after passing through Mirzapur and Chandauli districts of eastern U.P., ended with a massive two-day dharna on 9-10 March. The campaign was led by party PB member and U.P. state secretary Com. Akhilendra Pratap Singh. Dozens of mass meetings in which thousands of people, especially the rural poor, participated formed part of this campaign. The tension prevailing after the bomb blasts in Varanasi on 7th March and the efforts of the RSS-BJP to whip communal passion made the task of organizing this dharna a challenging political necessity. The revolutionary zeal of the toiling masses far outweighed the threats of the fascists, and they turned up in thousands on the soil of Varanasi with a clarion call - 'We will not let Uttar Pradesh become another Gujrat', 'Stop communal politics on the dead bodies of blast victims'.

The programme began with a one-minute silence in memory of those killed in the blasts. Thereafter, addressing the dharna, Com. Akhilendra said that there is a distinct strengthening of nationalist feelings against the imperialist intervention of the US in the internal affairs of our country, especially in the spheres of nuclear energy, agriculture and trade-industry. Bush faced unprecedented opposition from the masses during his recent visit to India. The initiative of the people is being channelised against the state and central govts. on demands of education, employment and democracy. The Varanasi blasts are part of a deep-rooted conspiracy to undermine the nationalist awakening and divert politics away from people's issues. Pro-American forces like BJP have become active in communalizing this incident. He demanded a high-powered judicial inquiry into these blasts.

Speaking about the promise of the UPA govt. to put an end to farmers' suicides and provide large-scale employment, he said that the NREGA has been implemented in only 22 districts of U.P. and the urban poor have not been covered by this scheme. There are reports of large-scale misappropriation of funds in the NREGA for making job cards. The job cards were supposed to be distributed to the poor by the end of Jan. '06 but this process has not yet started. In spite of the Rs. 25 lakhs released by the Centre for making free job cards, the gram pradhans and secretaries are charging 10-15 rupees from the poor in the name of registration and photography. He said that only their united assertion could check this loot of funds. The districts of Sonebhadra, Mirzapur and Chandauli are facing a drought-like condition; yet the govt. is forcibly collecting revenue and tax from the farmers. There is acute shortage of water not only for irrigation but also for drinking.

Incidentally, the ex-P.M. Mr.V.P.Singh along with CPI(ML) and CPI(M) had recently participated in a programme to demand for irrigation water from the Bhoka dam in Chandauli district. Com. Akhilendra said that a major reason for the water crisis is the rampant corruption in water-related schemes. Funds allocated for cleaning of irrigation canals and boring deep wells have been looted by corrupt officials and ministers. He demanded that the state govt. should make public the efforts it is making to end the water crisis.

Recently, the U.P. Chief Minister announced that all unemployed graduates registered with the employment exchange till 31st Dec. '05 would be given a monthly allowance of rupees 500 per month from 1st April '06. The Party state secretary said that the Mulayam govt. should provide allowance to all the unemployed graduates by waiving the condition of registration in the employment exchange. He said that weavers and other artisans of U.P. are facing acute hardships and these sections should be brought under the employment guarantee scheme and BPL cards be issued to them immediately.

The Mulayam govt. came in for a lot of flak on the issues of social justice and secularism. Mulayam govt. had recently granted SC status to 14 OB castes, a decision that was later stayed by the High Court. Com. Akhilendra accused the U.P. govt. of pitting the MBCs (Most Backward Castes) against the Dalits and demanded that the MBCs should be granted separate reservation quota on the basis of their population. Also, Dalit Muslims should be granted SC/ST status.

Recently, several incidents in the state have exposed the so-called secular credentials of Mulayam and his concessions to BJP's communal politics are an indication of his growing proximity with the BJP. In the Mau riots a few months back, he said that the looting and arson continued for 72 hours in the presence of the state home secretary and DGP in the town. The Sangh outfits not only initiated the riots but they also fanned false communal propaganda in the state with the tacit support of Mulayam. The RSS-BJP tried to instigate communal riots in the aftermath of the killing of one of its mafia-turned MLAs Krishnanand Rai in a gang war in Gazipur. Had it not been for the timely intervention by the Party and the collective wisdom of the masses, the state would have faced untold misery due to the communal fodder Mulayam is supplying to an emboldened BJP, which till late was issueless and clueless about its future course in UP and elsewhere.

The day the RTE campaign took off, news came that the enquiry committee set up for looking into the 2003 Rantola encounter in Sonbhadra district had recommended framing of murder charges against the 15 accused policemen who had killed two students in a fake encounter. The CBI is already investigating the case of the Bhawanipur massacre. Coming down heavily on the successive state govts. for unleashing a reign of terror on the tribals and poor of that region, he said that if the State and Central governments did not hamper a fair enquiry into the

Bhawanipur case, the ex-CM Rajnath Singh would be behind bars. Expressing concern at the growing threat to democracy from such forces, he said that there is a mafia-criminal takeover of democratic institutions ranging from Lok Sabha to the Gram Sabha. He demanded that the people should be granted the right to recall in the Constitution.

As the RTE campaign was nearing its end, the sudden blasts in Varanasi gave an opportunity to the Sangh outfits to fish in troubled waters. CPI(ML) took the communal bull by its horns and termed the incident as a deep-rooted conspiracy. A pledge was undertaken by thousands who had assembled and an eight-point resolution was read. The resolution condemned the way in which the RSS-BJP were trying to communalise the blasts and congratulated the people of the state, especially Varanasi, for rejecting communal politics. The resolution condemned the proposed Rath Yatra of Advani-Rajnath and resolved not to let this communal campaign succeed. The people pledged that while defeating the communal conspiracy of RSS-BJP, they would sharpen their struggle on the issues of education, employment, democracy, nuclear energy, trade-commerce and agrarian crisis.

The mass meeting at the dharna site was addressed by prominent intellectuals and scientists like Dr.R.K.Mandal from BHU and Dr.V.Tiwari and Pranay Krishna from Allahabad University. These intellectuals expressed their concern about the recent nuclear deal and said that it not only undermined the sovereignty of the country but would also hamper indigenous research in this field. A letter from Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati was read out in support of the issues raised by CPI(ML). Referring to the proposed Rath Yatra of Advani and Rajnath, it said that it was Ravana, the perpetrator of terror, who boarded the Rath and not Ram by whose name these fanatics swear.

A Memorandum was sent to the CM after the dharna. It demanded immediate implementation of the NREGA in word and spirit, declaration of Poorvanchal as drought area and provision of irrigation facility, increasing the unemployment allowance to Rs. 1000 and waiver of condition of registration for the unemployed, separate reservation quota to MBCs and arrest of 15 policemen charged in the Rantola massacre.

The meeting was also addressed by Dr. Muneeza Khan, Registrar, Gandhi Vidya Sansthan, Varanasi, Ishwari Kushwaha, President of Poorvanchal Kisan Sabha, Md. Salim, National President of RYA, Dinkar Kapoor, State Secretary, AICCTU, Kripa Verma, State President, AIPWA and Gagan Prakash, State Vice President of AISA.

– **P.Shukla**

PARTY SCHOOL

Notes on Party Programme

I

[April 22, 2006 would mark the 37th foundation anniversary of the CPI(ML). On this occasion let us devote ourselves to a fresh reading of our Party Programme, the most basic of our Party documents. Recent years have witnessed major changes in terms of economic policies and political forces all around us. The communist movement too in our country is passing through a phase of realignments and in many of our major areas of struggle and influence, comrades with different political backgrounds are joining our Party. The better we grasp our Party Programme, the better will we be able to deal with this new juncture. The purpose of the present write-up is to encourage a serious study of our Party Programme throughout the Party. This is the first part of a two-part series and we will welcome comments and questions from our readers on the subject. – Editor]

The emergence of the CPI(ML) in 1969 marked the first radical rupture between the opportunist and revolutionary currents within the Indian communist movement. To be sure, the Communist Party of India had already undergone a split five years ago, and the newly formed CPI(M) had programmatically dissociated itself from the CPI. But inner-party debate over the party's programme and tactics had been far from resolved and the CPI(M) continued to experience a powerful internal struggle challenging its centrist positions. The peasant rebellion of Naxalbari and its political aftermath were organically linked with this ideological-political debate and the process reached its logical conclusion with the formation of the CPI(ML) in April 1969 and adoption of its new programme in the First Congress held in May 1970.

With the arrival of the CPI(ML), the contention between the opportunist and revolutionary streams of the communist movement assumed a new intensity and sharpness. But the CPI(ML) soon suffered an enormous setback, and it was only later in the 1980s that the full dimensions of the programmatic differences between the CPI(M) and CPI(ML) began to reveal themselves. In the initial phase of the CPI(ML), the contrast between the CPI(M) and the CPI(ML) was understood more in terms of form of struggle - boycott versus participation in elections, illegal versus legal forms of struggle, etc. But from the 1980s on began a new period of the Party's revival marked by a steady and comprehensive expansion of mass practice on different fronts including successful interventions in the electoral arena.

Belying the pedantic predictions of the CPI(ML) becoming another CPI(M), a resurgent CPI(ML) has gone on to enrich its strategy and tactics in clear demarcation from the CPI(M)'s increasingly reformist trajectory.

Evolution of CPI(M) and CPI(ML) Programmes

Over the years both the CPI(ML) and CPI(M) programmes have been updated or amended in certain ways. The rectification movement of the late 1970s provided the first major impetus to make certain changes in the original CPI(ML) programme. Based on a deeper dialectical understanding of the society, state and the revolutionary movement, the development of the Party's own comprehensive practice and multifarious forms and fronts of struggle, and major shifts in the international and national situation, the CPI(ML) effected a series of changes in its general programme between the Third Congress (December 1982) and Fifth Congress (December 1992). The new programme has retained the revolutionary thrust of the 1970 programme and most of its basic formulations regarding the class analysis of the Indian society and state while adopting flexibility in terms of forms of struggle to facilitate a greater expansion of the Party's mass practice and intervention in the electoral arena.

The CPI(M) programme too has undergone an 'updating' a few years ago. While the CPI(M) argued that the updating had become necessary particularly in view of questions posed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, it turned out that the updating was essentially meant to enable the CPI(M) to take part in a bourgeois government at the Centre while allowing CPI(M)-led state governments to implement neo-liberal policies in the name of engaging with the reality of globalisation. These are precisely areas where the old CPI(M) programme had been posing certain hurdles and the new programme has now removed those 'anomalies' to enable the CPI(M) to make more opportunist adjustments with bourgeois coalition politics and neo-liberal economics.

CPI(M)'s Journey from Centrism to Right Reformism

The changes effected in the original programmes of the two parties have naturally also given rise to a tendency to restore or resurrect the original versions. A section of the ML movement which dogmatically shies away from mass practice and political initiatives has now renamed itself as the CPI(Maoist). This is actually an attempt to ossify or freeze the 1970 programme. Our transition from the 1970 programme to its present version has essentially entailed a separation of questions pertaining to tactics from those of strategy. To block this transition, our Maoist

friends have effectively eliminated the domain of tactics and elevated everything to the realm of strategy. It is with this understanding that they have divorced Mao from the Marxist-Leninist tradition and have launched a special 'ism' after his name. But they too probably agree that by sticking to a metaphysical understanding of the Chinese model and blurring the distinction between strategy and tactics, they have moved away from the essence of the CPI(ML) and so they have shed their claim to being an inheritor of the CPI(ML) trend and launched a new party with the new name called CPI(Maoist).

An attempt is also being made by some Marxist friends who were formerly with the CPI(M), and have grown disillusioned with some of the recent policies and tactics of the CPI(M), particularly the direction in which the party programme was updated in 2000, to resurrect the 1964 programme and revive the 'true CPI(M)'. True, the 1964 programme was the product of a major inner-party struggle against revisionism and by advocating a people's democratic revolution against the present state led by the big bourgeoisie it did distinguish the new party from the CPI's path of national democratic revolution in collaboration with the supposedly progressive and anti-imperialist national bourgeoisie. But the 1964 programme made a half-way compromise on many key questions and a centrist ambivalence was thus written into it from the beginning. In a period of growing rightward shift in the overall economic and political environment, it is no wonder that this centrist compromise is falling apart and is being increasingly interpreted and pushed in a blatantly right-reformist direction.

In fact, following the Naxalbari peasant rebellion and the emergence of the CPI(ML), ideological struggle for the CPI(M) leadership has become essentially a one-sided and often misplaced and exaggerated struggle against Left sectarianism and adventurism. While a veritable ceasefire has since come into effect in the CPI(M)'s ideological struggle with the CPI, people raising ideological-political debates within the CPI(M) have almost invariably been identified and treated as potential Naxalites. Post-Emergency, once the CPI criticized its own 'Emergency excesses' in terms of its relationship with the Congress, the CPI(M) and CPI began rapidly moving closer and when the rise of the BJP ended the political monopoly or exclusive preeminence of the Congress, the differences between the two parties over the question of attitude to or relation with the Congress have virtually been resolved. The 1964 programme which once demarcated the CPI(M) from the CPI, has now in its 'updated' version become a basis for closer strategic and tactical convergence between the two parties while demarcating the CPI(M) from communist revolutionaries.

Why CPI(ML) Accepts Mao Zedong Thought as a Guiding Principle

Let us now look at some of the key points of difference in the programmes of the CPI(M) and CPI(ML) that underpin the two different tactical lines being pursued by the two parties. To begin with the question of ideology, the CPI(ML) programme has always recognized Mao Zedong Thought along with Marxism-Leninism as the party's guiding principle, something the CPI(M) treats as a proof of the CPI(ML)'s continuing obsession with the Chinese path. Why do we make this special and separate mention of Mao Zedong Thought in our Party programme? Were it merely a case of according due recognition to the contributions of Mao and the experience of victorious Chinese revolution, we need not have gone to the extent of taking Mao's thought as a guiding principle in conjunction with Marxism-Leninism. Clearly, the mention of Mao's thought as an ideological guideline in our Party programme has less to do with China and the Chinese Communist Party and more to do with India and the tasks and challenges of our revolution.

At the time of the emergence of the CPI(ML) and the drafting of our first programme, Mao and his thought were important on three major counts.

For one, there was the obvious relevance of the experience of the victorious Chinese revolution for any serious revolutionary attempt in India, which had strangely been denied all through by the CPI and CPI(M) leadership. This denial reflected an accumulated neglect of rural work and refusal to nurture and unleash the revolutionary potential of peasant movement in the Indian context. In fact, even when the potential had asserted itself in the course of the great Telengana movement, the CPI leadership could think of no other way than surrender of arms and withdrawal of the movement. Mao made a very modest and mild reference to this crippling lapse of the communist leadership in the course of his talk with some representatives of Latin American Communist Parties when he said, "I think that in countries where feudalism is strong the political party of the proletariat should go to the countryside and seek out the peasants. ... The peasants are the chief ally of the proletariat. In the beginning our Party too did not realize the importance of work among the peasants and put urban work first and rural work second. It seems to me that the Parties in some Asian countries, such as India and Indonesia, have not done so well in rural work." The recognition of Mao Zedong Thought as a guiding principle for the CPI(ML) followed from a deep urge to correct this historical imbalance, lay a new emphasis on rural work, and develop revolutionary bases in the countryside on the basis of a militant mobilization of the rural poor.

The Great International Communist Debate against Revisionism

No less crucial at that time was the Great Debate and the struggle against revisionism in the international communist movement, especially in third world countries with close ties with the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's thesis that third world countries ruled by a progressive national bourgeoisie could make a peaceful transition to socialism by pursuing a non-capitalist path of development with Soviet aid and collaboration had found many takers within the CPI leadership. The task for communist parties in such countries had accordingly been reframed as collaboration with the progressive bourgeoisie against imperialism and the forces of domestic reaction so as to expedite and consolidate the process of transition along a non-capitalist path. The CPI(M) did reject the Khrushchev thesis in words, but it refused to take sides in the Great Debate between the revisionist and revolutionary lines. It also continued to characterize the contention between US imperialism and the Soviet-led socialist camp as the principal contradiction in international situation, thereby downplaying the central role of third world revolutionary movements in combating US imperialism even as the US was being challenged and pushed back by the great revolutionary advance of the people of Vietnam.

There was also a third aspect linked to the cultural revolution then underway in China. In the course of the Great Debate, the CPC had also developed a critique of the Soviet Union's experience of socialist construction. Pointing to the serious bureaucratic distortions creeping into the Soviet economy and state system, the CPC had emphasized the key role of class struggle even in a post-revolutionary context of socialist construction and advocated a cultural revolution to thwart the possibility of capitalist restoration. While the CPC's critique of the Soviet experience had many valid points vindicated eventually by the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Cultural Revolution too was subsequently discarded by the CPC because of its excesses and anarchic consequences. The 1970 programme of the CPI(ML) had not only upheld the CPC-led Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution but gone on to declare the people's democratic revolution of India as a part of the GPCR. This approach of linking the revolution in India to a post-revolutionary phase of China was clearly a metaphysical and ahistorical one, and the CPI(ML) subsequently withdrew this sweeping generalization.

Studying Chinese Experiences as Reference Material to Grasp India's Concrete Conditions

The key challenge of our revolution is certainly one of integrating the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete conditions of India. It was precisely the integration of the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete conditions of China that gave rise to Mao Zedong Thought and accorded it a special relevance beyond the confines of China, especially for fellow developing and Asian countries placed in similar situations. The relevance should be particularly obvious for a neighbouring country like India with comparable features like a predominantly agricultural economy and population, persistence of strong feudal remnants and continuing imperialist plunder and domination. Mao himself was however quite cautious and modest in recommending the relevance of the Chinese experiences for other countries. As he observed in the course of his aforementioned talk with some representatives of Latin American Communist Parties: "The experience of the Chinese revolution, that is, building rural base areas, encircling the cities from the countryside and finally seizing the cities, may not be wholly applicable to many of your countries, though it can serve for your reference. I beg to advise you not to transplant Chinese experience mechanically. The experience of any foreign country can serve only for reference and must not be regarded as dogma. The universal truth of Marxism-Leninism and the concrete conditions of your own countries - the two must be integrated."

It is in this critical spirit that we include Mao Zedong Thought as a guiding principle for our Party and revolution. While we are aware of the many structural similarities between China and India, we are also keenly aware of the many dissimilarities and especially superstructural specificities of the Indian situation where we have uneven regional and sectoral development within an integrated national economy, and coexistence of many nationalities, religions, languages and castes within a constitutional parliamentary set-up. Instead of trying to copy the exact military course of the Chinese revolution, we therefore lay stress on the ideological and political lessons of building a powerful communist party and movement in the countryside and developing proletarian leadership over an anti-feudal anti-imperialist united front. Ironically, the Indian ruling classes who had denounced the CPI(ML) as Chinese agents have now themselves grown very fond of the economic reforms being currently pursued in China and they never miss an opportunity of preaching the Chinese path to the Indian communists. Even the CPI(M) seeks to invoke China to justify the rightwing pro-capital policies being zealously implemented by CPI(M)-led state governments.

At the other end of the spectrum, our Maoist friends are doing precisely what Mao had asked not to do. They have reduced the Chinese experiences to mere military technique and made a dogma of it. The result is there for all to see - while they have somewhat developed their military abilities, they have failed miserably in developing any militant mass movement and capacity for political intervention,

and in the name of punishing the class enemy their squads are indulging increasingly in completely indefensible mass killings of working people, dalits, adivasis and minorities in particular.

Interestingly, while our Indian Maoists are dogmatically trying to transplant the Chinese experiences in utter disregard of the concrete social and political conditions of India, their counterparts in Nepal are grappling increasingly with the specifics of the superstructure in Nepal, with finding ways of isolating and confronting the monarchy and advancing the agenda of formation of a new constituent assembly and transition to a democratic republic.

On the Anti-Feudal Task of India's Democratic Revolution

The CPI(ML) programme continues to characterize the Indian society as semi-feudal and semi-colonial. There are many in the Left who found such a characterization unacceptable in 1970 and who find it all the more incongruous today in the era of globalisation and all-round penetration of capital and market through all possible pores of Indian economy and society. In fact, many of these friends find the whole concept of the democratic stage of our revolution absurd and superfluous. For them India is just another capitalist country awaiting a socialist revolution. One can understand this argument when it is raised by our socialist friends who have never been able to reconcile themselves with the challenge of a people's democratic revolution, with the task of exercising communist leadership over anti-feudal anti-imperialist struggles without which the conditions of a socialist revolution can never mature and all talks of establishing proletarian political hegemony or supremacy are bound to remain an empty rhetoric. But what objection can the CPI(M), which remains a loyal advocate of the concept of a people's democratic revolution, possibly have to the characterisation of Indian society as semi-feudal?

The CPI(M) ideologues seem to have two basic problems with the recognition of India as a semi-feudal society. They believe that feudal remnants have long been on their way out and are now just too narrowly confined to a few small pockets to exert any general influence on the overall nature of the society and its development. Secondly, they tend to counterpose semi-feudalism to capitalism and a semi-feudal society therefore becomes all the more untenable in their eyes in the present era of globalisation.

Nobody is arguing that capitalism is not developing in India or that the country is experiencing some kind of feudal restoration. The development of capitalism in India or the Indian bourgeoisie pursuing a capitalist path of development can only be news to those who may have once been infected with the illusion of non-

capitalist or state-capitalist transition to socialism. For Marxists, the real question is and can only be that of determining the degree and nature of capitalist development in India and it is in this context that the question of feudal remnants assumes crucial importance.

We Do Need A Revolution to Overthrow Feudal Remnants

The Marxist-Leninist literature talks of two basic patterns or ways of capitalist development in agriculture, the landlord path and the peasant path. The latter deals a decisive blow to feudal remnants and paves the way for the most rapid and free development of productive forces and capitalist relations while the former gives a long lease of life to feudal remnants and leads to a very slow, distorted and painful development of capitalism.

We do not have the scope here to get into an elaborate discussion about the nature of capitalist development in Indian agriculture, but let us note that Marxist observers of the Indian scene are more or less united that India has experienced a variant of the landlord path in which the bourgeoisie has forged a strategic alliance with feudal remnants. Does not the fact that the Government of India has to identify every third Indian district as backward according to most parameters point to the large-scale prevalence of feudal remnants? Even in a state like Punjab, universally acknowledged as one of India's most capitalistically developed states, do not we see feudal features like usury and semi-bondage taking a heavy toll in the midst of the ongoing agrarian crisis?

Central to the very notion of a people's democratic revolution is its anti-feudal task. In terms of its declared objective, the CPI(M) programme continues to adhere to the people's democratic revolution, yet it has never recognized the real extent and gravity of feudal remnants in Indian society. No wonder, the CPI(M) remains a political stranger to the real world of feudal oppression, landlord-kulak violence and anti-feudal awakening of the rural poor in large parts of the country. By contrast, the CPI(ML)'s vigorous and determined opposition to feudal remnants and its sincere commitment to the anti-feudal task of India's democratic revolution has enabled it to break new grounds and strike deep roots in many parts of the country's backward regions.

(to be continued in Liberation, May 2006)

PUBLIC HEALTH

Avian Flu, Human Fear

'Kill the chicken to scare the monkey' goes an old Chinese proverb. It is a piece of ancient wisdom worth recalling especially in the times we live in where chicken are indeed being killed by the millions to scare the human monkey.

One is referring of course to the pandemonium over the avian flu 'pandemic' that is gripping many parts of the world, including India in recent times.

According to the 'believers' avian flu, an influenza with a high mortality rate – which is transmitted from birds to human beings will become catastrophic when it starts spreading between human beings 'at some stage'. The WHO for example has been warning the world repeatedly of a pandemic that could kill 'millions' within a period of months if not weeks with the total death toll being put by some as high as 150 million.

According to the 'skeptics', like this writer, the way to understand the avian flu phenomenon is as follows:

a) The flu is indeed as dangerous as it is portrayed to be and many millions are going to die of it. Given the fact we have no known vaccine or effective antidote (except the very dubious 'Tamiflu' currently being stockpiled by many governments) and given the sheer speed with which such a pandemic will go around the globe there is really little anyone can do to prevent it or even stem its tide. In this scenario avian flu falls in the same category as the unpreventable possibility (don't ask about probabilities) of an asteroid hitting Planet Earth or another tsunami even larger than the last one hitting us – and killing millions. Or,

b) The flu is not as dangerous as it is portrayed to be and falls into the same category as many infectious diseases in the globe with a high mortality rate like Ebola or meningitis or Legionnaire's Disease all of them deadly but in a localized way. In which case all the current panic over the disease is completely unwarranted and smacks of either extreme paranoia or a planned diversion of global attention away from other things that are actually killing many people around the world every day – including the US war on Iraq, malaria, TB and HIV.

To put the entire avian flu scare in perspective it is important to remember that the idea of a 'killer' global pandemic in recent years has been hitting the headlines off and on ever since the panic over SARS in early 2003 and over anthrax in 2001 soon after the September 11 event. To go back even further in modern history there have been several such global alarms over influenza pandemics ever since the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918 that is supposed to have left over 40 million people dead around the world in a matter of a few months.

The first documented infection of humans with an avian influenza virus, that normally infects only birds and pigs, occurred in Hong Kong in 1997, when the H5N1 strain caused severe respiratory disease in 18 humans, of whom 6 died. Medical researchers believe that the virus had jumped directly from birds to humans.

The current fear about avian flu is because of the possibility that humans, if concurrently infected with human and avian influenza strains, could serve as the "mixing vessel" for the emergence of a novel subtype that could be easily transmitted from person to person. Such an event would mark the start of an influenza pandemic against which we have little or no immunity.

There is no evidence so far however that human-to-human transmission of avian flu has occurred anywhere. The total number of avian flu cases recorded since 2003 up to mid-March 2006 has been 176 out of which there have been 97 deaths. Given all this information anyone should be deeply afraid indeed and initiate measures to prevent such a global pandemic from ever happening. The real question however is as to what these measures should consist of, what other health issues pose competing threats to the world and hence what the international priorities should be.

Instead of going to the root of the problem which often lies in poverty, lack of health infrastructure, ignorance and pressures of the market economy on everyone from pig and poultry farmers to pharmaceutical companies international agencies and governments are dubiously headed in the direction of treating avian flu on par with the threat of global terrorism. So the microbe is the new 'terrorist' to be hunted down by medical 'commandoes' or its 'facilitators' carpet bombed out of existence with medication.

Falling expenditure on public health

If there is a chance at all of tackling a global pandemic it can only be at the grassroots level by promoting the concept of Health for All and by making it a reality by investing the required resources in the right places.

For the simple truth about any public health system is that it can only be as strong as the poorest patient in the country. What pandemics often do is to make everyone on the planet realize, quite harshly, that they are born equal and can also die equally.

If new diseases today originate in the crowded, poor and desperate parts of Asia and Africa the response cannot be to shut them out from the rest of the world. However instead of attracting more investment, with the juggernaut of privatization rolling across the globe, public health systems, particularly in the developing countries, are on the verge of collapse everywhere.

As all epidemics start at the local level it is essential that resources be urgently diverted to setting up basic public health infrastructure and creating the necessary human resources. There is no indication at all that either the WHO or its member governments are very serious about this at all.

Global Migration

The movement of labour across national boundaries has been the Achilles Heel of the entire theory of globalization that claims that lowering tariffs and opening up markets will automatically bring all round prosperity. What this theory ignores is the real history of our world with its long periods of colonialism, imperialism and ever-present racism that deems some sections of the world as being more equal than others.

With unemployment rising in developed nations due to the dismantling of their social welfare systems by neo-liberal politicians there have been consistent attempts over the past decade or more to find any excuse possible to keep migrant labour out.

While crude racism is used often it is not really the ideal weapon because of its obviously illogical and indefensible nature. In recent years, the cover conjured up to harass migrants has been the possibility that they might be 'terrorists' – which automatically means anyone with dark skin, a beard and a strange sounding name or even any one of the above will do!

When the bogey of terrorism loses credibility and dies out I am afraid the new pretext to keep out developing country migrants from going to developed nations is going to be 'disease'. After all a microbe cannot catch a flight or a boat or walk over land all by itself – it also needs a carrier and who is more qualified to carry the burden of strange and new diseases than the humble migrant worker?

There might also come a day, like it did unfortunately in the days of the Nazis, when the carriers and microbes will be deemed to be one and the same and dealt with accordingly. All of which brings me to my next point.

Human Rights

At the height of the paranoia about SARS I remember the way the purpose of public health suddenly became reason enough to take away all basic rights of individuals even merely suspected of being 'microbe carriers'.

While international law on human rights recognises that governments may infringe on civil and political rights for public health purposes governments cannot assume they can do anything they want with the rights of individuals.

However, at the time of the SARS outbreak, given its suspected origins in China there was widespread discrimination across the south-east Asia region and even in other parts of the world against mainland Chinese citizens traveling anywhere.

Within China itself, once the authorities decided to make a big show of how concerned they were about the outbreak, hundreds if not thousands were quarantined, arrested arbitrarily and had their individual rights suspended indefinitely. In Singapore, officials went to the extent of requiring suspected SARS carriers to wear electronic tags that could trace their movements, which were already restricted under threat of punishment.

Given the severe erosion of human rights that the world is witnessing due to the US-led 'War on Terror' the last thing the world needs now is one more excuse to confine, arrest, isolate people and suspend all their human rights under the pretext of their being a 'threat to law, order and the American Way of Life'. Unfortunately the way the WHO has approached the entire issue of possible global pandemics smacks of a heavy cowboy influence coming from the Head of State of the world's loneliest Superpower!

Imperialism

Lastly, it needs to be mentioned, that quite ominously, in the context of the revival of Western colonial adventures a la Iraq or Afghanistan in recent years, the new paranoia over avian flu provides one more excuse to rich and powerful nations to erode national sovereignty of poorer countries and 'intervene' – this time under the guise of safeguarding global health! (It is only a matter of time before El Baradei of the IAEA is given the task of identifying 'rogue nations' that don't report their local epidemics to the world)

Even well meaning public health activists in some developed countries seriously talk of 'intervention' in developing countries that cannot 'manage' their local epidemics properly. In other words, Western colonialists who spread the plague, small pox, and other diseases far and wide through their conquests around the world for centuries will now come back and occupy Asian, African or Latin American nations because well – 'they are potential TB carriers you know!'

While this warning may still be a bit early there is no doubt in my mind at all that given the portents at some point of time in the future a WHO report about X or Y country 'hiding an epidemic' could trigger off global sanctions and possibly war. There is still time to avert the possibility of health becoming the next weapon of choice in the arsenal of Imperialism.

–Sundaram

INTERNATIONAL

Denmark Has Lost Its Innocence

[Below we reproduce excerpts from an article by Sven Tarp, International Relations Secretary, Communist Party of Denmark (Marxist-Leninist), dealing with the background of the controversy surrounding the publication of offensive cartoons about Prophet Mohammed by a Danish newspaper]

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," Shakespeare wrote in his famous Hamlet some four centuries ago. The events that have taken place during the last weeks and months show that Shakespeare's words have gained new actuality. We who live in Denmark can confirm that everything is not as it ought to be.

According to the modern myth already created, it all started in my hometown, the city of Aarhus, on September 30 last year when the national newspaper with a regional name, *Jyllands Posten* (The Jutland Post), published 12 cartoons that presented an offensive, stereotypical image of Mohammed.

The official reason for printing the cartoons was, according to the editor-in-chief, to challenge the way freedom of speech is practised in Denmark as it is allegedly being restricted due to a growing Muslim influence. Before publishing the cartoons, they were shown to a series of experts who explained that they most certainly would provoke anger among Muslims who would feel offended by the way their prophet was portrayed. So, the printing of the cartoons was from the very beginning planned as a malicious provocation.

Official and Real Motives

The publication of the cartoons is part of a national agenda promoted by the Danish ruling circles with a double purpose:

- to divide the Danish working class into nationals and foreigners, Christians and Muslims, in order to weaken its resistance to the brutal imposition of neo-liberal policies at a very specific moment where the Danish economy is momentarily one of the most thriving within the general framework of a crisis-ridden capitalist world economy;
- to weaken – by creating an artificial image of the Muslim world as an enemy – the growing demand among the Danish people that Danish troops should be withdrawn from Iraq where they are taking part in the illegal occupation headed by the U.S. imperialism.

From the very beginning, the whole issue has been treated with a mixture of arrogance and stupidity, both by the editors of *Jyllands Posten* and by the Danish government. It soon became clear that the Muslim peoples did feel offended. The Muslim society in Denmark, in early October, organized demonstrations and called

on the newspaper to apologize for the publication. This was refused with the false pretext of defending freedom of speech.

On October 19, ambassadors from 11 Muslim countries requested a meeting with the Danish government in order to discuss the cartoons. In a very arrogant manner, the rightist government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen refused to meet the ambassadors for a discussion that might have prevented subsequent events.

In an action unheard of in the history of Danish diplomacy, 22 former Danish ambassadors publicly criticized the Prime Minister's refusal to meet with representatives of Muslim countries. But the government stuck to its own decision. It apparently was not unhappy with the fact that the cartoons caused disunity and distracted popular attention from the social consequences of its planned "welfare reforms" that were announced last autumn.

It was only when the national agenda turned into an international crisis of unprecedented dimensions that the government and the newspaper decided to take action. But even then, their arrogance prevented them from saving what could be saved. The editor of *Jyllands Posten*, for example, apologized to Muslims because they felt offended, but he did not apologize for publishing the offensive cartoons, because such an apology, according to him, would be a violation of his freedom of speech! In this way, the apology was not enough to end the protests and neither was the appearance of the Danish Prime Minister on Arab and Muslim television channels where he didn't deliver the message expected from him.

A reactionary newspaper *Jyllands Posten* is one of Denmark's largest newspapers with a long tradition of rightist policy. In the 1930s, it was infamous for defending pro-Nazi positions. After the Second World War, it turned completely pro-NATO. During the war in Vietnam, it was a loyal ally of U.S. imperialism. Today, it is an arduous defender of the Zionist state of Israel and the imperialist occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the growing pressure on Iran, Syria and other independent countries.

Jyllands Posten is considered the unofficial organ of expression of the Liberal Party of Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. As such, it is not an innocent player in the present crisis. Its defence of freedom of speech is nothing but hypocritical.

During the last years, *Jyllands Posten* has transformed itself into a national platform of the most rabid attacks against communists and other progressive people. Even the most idiotic anti-communist professor has free access to its columns. The freedom of speech practised by the newspaper is used to distort, silence and criminalize communist and progressive ideas. The way the former socialist countries in Europe and the Danish communists who were active during the Cold War are portrayed is just as insulting as the 12 cartoons.

For the Danish communists, freedom of speech is a beautiful principle that takes its concrete form according to the concrete historical context and the social class that practises it. It is a necessity for the free development of individual human beings and their participation in the democratic processes of modern society. But it cannot be accepted as an unlimited right of the ruling class to insult other people and cause tension, violence, war and destruction. Freedom of speech should always be subordinated to ethics and the rules of civilized behaviour among peoples and nations.

A Reactionary Government

The extent of the anti-Danish protests that have swept all over the Muslim world during the last weeks has taken the Danish public by surprise. Very few expected that something like this could ever happen. For years the Danish people have been indoctrinated with the belief that they lived in the best of all worlds; that they themselves were so very tolerant and everybody else, especially the Muslim peoples, intolerant; that their country was well-respected and their government well-intentioned and generous; that the Danish troops in Afghanistan and Iraq did a fine and humanitarian job and were well-received by the local people, etc.

This lie has survived and taken root because the Danish press, in spite of its own claim to be liberal and broad-minded, has turned into one of the most controlled and regimented in Europe. This control also explains why the Danish people haven't seen what has been in the pipeline for several years.

Denmark, that 20 years ago was known for its social democratic welfare system, its humanitarian assistance to the third world and its footnote policy that offered certain resistance to the most aggressive plans of NATO and U.S. imperialism, has little by little been transformed into a very reactionary country. At the international level, this has expressed itself in Denmark's subordination to U.S. imperialism and its participation in the aggressive wars against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, Danish foreign "aid" is being still more conditioned by the acceptance of neo-liberal and pro-imperialist positions.

It Started More than 100 Years Ago

The present crisis cannot be explained only with the cartoons and the arrogance of the Danish ruling circles, although they certainly contributed a lot. The real explanation should be found in the repeated humiliations that the Muslim peoples have suffered for more than 100 years, first under the rule of European colonialism and now in the form of joint U.S. and European imperialist domination with constant aggressions, occupations and impositions of Western imperialist interests in their countries. The Muslim reaction has been on its way for a long time. In this light, it is completely fortuitous that it was exactly Denmark and the cartoons that

started the present revolt among the Muslim peoples. It would have come sooner or later. On the surface, the present revolt is taking the form of a clash between civilizations, a kind of religious war, with all the irrational fanaticism, different agendas, dangers and unclear dividing lines this brings about. But in its essence, it is an important anti-imperialist movement directed against world imperialism headed by the United States of America and with Denmark as an active and arrogant little brother. As Danish communists we greet this movement and hope that it will find still clearer and more consequent expressions.

However, the fact that it has taken a religious form mixed with fanaticism and different local and regional agendas also creates confusion and secondary contradictions and makes it more complex to forge an international anti-imperialist front. The burning of Danish flags and national symbols, for example, however justified it may be, insults the national feelings of a considerable part of the Danish population and contribute in this way to the strengthening of the rightist and extremist parties. Spontaneous manifestations and demonstrations for tolerance and solidarity are emerging everywhere. Another positive result of the revolt in the Muslim countries is that a third of the Danish soldiers who were expected to be sent to Iraq in the near future now refuse to go. Hence, an important battle of ideas is taking place within Danish society.

Position of Danish Communists

The main line of activity of the Communist Party of Denmark-ML is the struggle for the unity of the working class and the mobilization of the local and national trade union movement against the dividing policy of the ruling bourgeoisie. At the same time, we demand that the editors of *Jyllands Posten* should make a clear-cut apology for printing the cartoons and that the government should follow up in such a way that it becomes absolutely clear that it repudiates the provocation.

Our party is also active in the preparation for the big anti-war demonstrations on March 18, which will take place under the broad banner of withdrawing the troops from Iraq. At the same time, we are stepping up our solidarity with the Iraqi resistance movement and the Palestinian people while we are condemning the imperialist pressure and threats against Iran, Syria and other independent countries. We believe that the present crisis should be used to strengthen the anti-imperialist movement of solidarity with the oppressed peoples all over the world.

Finally, we wish to say to our Muslim brothers and sisters that at the end of day we have the same enemies, world imperialism headed by the Bush administration, and that we should unite in a broad international front in order to fight this enemy number one of humanity.

Second Cover

Who gives a damn for Iraq?

IN THE run up to the US war on Iraq over three years ago there was a joke doing its rounds on the internet which went like this:

Bush Jr. and Colin Powell are sitting in a public park somewhere in the United States deep in conversation when a passing citizen stops and demands to know what his President and Secretary of State are discussing.

'The coming war on Iraq' says Bush Jr. To which the citizen asks 'And how many people do you think will die in this war?'

'100,000 Iraqis and one bicycle repair man' says Bush Jr

A bit taken aback the citizen asks "But why the bicycle repair man?"

To which Bush turns to Powell and says triumphantly 'Ha! See I told you nobody gives a damn for those Iraqis'.

On hindsight, given the mass murder the Americans have carried out in Iraq, this is a sort of sick joke indeed. But distasteful as it is the joke is also prescient about one thing – nobody in the world really gives a damn for the Iraqis.

Not the United States, of course, the man-eating monstrosity of a nation that it has become. Killing Iraqis for the rulers of the US is like swatting mosquitoes, a pursuit to be practiced in leisure time, a concept as American as apple pie. Between the actual wars and invasions initiated by the Senior and Junior Bushes and the long years of sanctions that Bill Clinton presided over successive US regimes have killed anywhere between 1 to 1.5 million Iraqis by now.

Not the United Nations – that global den of spineless nobodies pretending to be still relevant while stooping low to accommodate every whim and fancy of the United States. The US war on Iraq was the last blow to the little credibility the UN had or whatever potential it possessed to bring about world peace. There are those who still pin hopes on a 'reformed' UN but that would be a task as onerous as converting Abu Gharib into a kindergarten.

Not the European Union, which for all earlier noises of dissent by leading members like Germany and France has quietly settled down to accepting the global hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon powers. Or who knows maybe they are just watching and waiting for the US and UK misadventure in Iraq to collapse before moving in to pick up the pieces. That's called raptor diplomacy.

Not fellow Arab countries, each of them run by tin pot sheiks cuckolded long, long ago by Big Brother United States into complete submission. What the Kuwaiti, Jordanian and Saudi elites should not forget is that those who profit from the death of their neighbours end up making the entire neighbourhood a graveyard.

Not Russia, which is too busy calculating how many little massacres they will need in Chechnya to add up to the big one by the US in Iraq. That's only partly true of

course as the Russians are also benefiting from the Iraq war not least through the huge oil price hikes it has brought about.

Not China, which too is busy counting the riches extracted from the US in return for their precious silence on Iraq. 'Lots of paper money and very few principles' has been the Chinese regime's motto for quite some time now – a funny little dictum in any other context than the tragic times we live in.

Certainly, certainly not the Indians who have shed whatever pretences of non-alignment they once had and are groveling at the feet of the US to take them on as a junior partner in their imperial conquests. The brown sahibs begging for entry into the white man's club, hankering after every shiny medal tossed at them by the West, the perfect colonial slaves climbing over the corpses of their own kind.

So who is it that gives a damn for the Iraqis?

The global anti-war movement, which though too tame and predictable in its actions, is still the only face of international resistance to the US/UK war on Iraq. In some countries, like Spain, at least the movement was able to change governments and force them to withdraw troops sent to Iraq. The sad fact is however that it has not really made too much of a difference to the US Imperial war machine. Being peaceful and pacifist should not mean the same as being passive and the time has come to do more than merely marching up and down the boulevards of Western metropolises shouting witty slogans. A real round of classical civil disobedience that paralyses places like London, Washington and Sydney is long overdue.

The Iraqi resistance, despite its diverse and disorganized nature, is certainly the only force right now countering US Imperialism on the frontlines. There are some in the antiwar movement who are shy of calling them a 'resistance' in any positive sense given the mix of nationalist and Islamic groups that make it up and the often indiscriminate violence it deploys while fighting the Americans.

Moqtada Sadr is certainly no Che Guevara and Iraq is still far away from producing a Ho Chi Minh but anyone who judges the Iraqi resistance by its ability to throw up recognizable icons should go back to the dim libraries they emerged from. The world having proved completely inept at preventing US aggression against Iraq has little right to prescribe etiquette and good manners to the colonized Iraqis.

–Sundaram

THIRD COVER

Varanasi Must Be Saved from Becoming another Ayodhya

THE TREMORS caused by the twin blasts in Varanasi on March 7 have been felt all over the country. While Varanasi promptly plunged into the act of rescuing and treating the injured, the whole country was one in condemning the blasts and the resultant loss of innocent lives. The people of Varanasi have since displayed a remarkable resolve to maintain peace and uphold the city's great tradition of composite culture and communal harmony. Varanasi had stood out as a centre of peace and secular resistance in the wake of the fascist demolition of the Babri Masjid, more than a decade later the city has once again refused to be provoked into communal violence in spite of dastardly attacks on its own people. India must emulate this exemplary culture of popular unity and communal harmony in the face of similar attacks and adversities.

The post-blast peace in Varanasi has been all the more remarkable because the BJP and the Sangh brigade had lost no time to launch its familiar attempts to communalise the issue and vitiate the atmosphere. Advani and Rajnath Singh have been quick in announcing rathyatras ostensibly for the sake of promoting national integration. The BJP which has suffered serious political reverses in the state clearly sees the blasts as a great opportunity to reenergize itself and renew its vicious communal political offensive. But to their credit, the people of Varanasi have so far successfully foiled the Sangh's designs while coping resolutely with the shock and trauma of the blasts.

While most media analyses have tended to generalize the Varanasi blasts as yet another act of terror and use it as another occasion to repeat the usual anti-terrorist prescriptions, the choice of the specific venue and time obviously suggests an element of deep-rooted political conspiracy. Of late, Uttar Pradesh has seen a spate of incidents of communal and mafia-criminal violence and political killings. The state is also witnessing rapid political developments leading to deepening crisis and uncertainty and sharp political competition and polarization. Clearly, the blasts cannot be viewed in isolation from this developing political context.

The choice of Varanasi, and more so the specific sites of blasts within the city, is also loaded with tremendous potential for communal political mischief. Eastern UP has emerged as the hotbed of communal and criminal operations and Varanasi is the nerve-centre of this region. It is also no secret that the Sangh identifies Kashi as one of its key strategic political targets along with Ayodhya and Mathura. At a time when UP is passing through a serious political crisis and a phase of sharp polarization, Varanasi obviously remains central to every design on the future of the power equation in Lucknow.

Let us also not miss the larger political context beyond the immediate political future of Uttar Pradesh. We have just seen huge popular mobilizations opposing the Bush visit to India. The protests have been marked by massive participation of the Muslim community, a community that has had to face heightened multi-

pronged attacks in recent years. We have also seen a welcome ideological and political crisis within the BJP and a steady decline in its political appeal. The BJP-Shiv Sena brand of communal politics is fast losing its edge. In terms of issues, Ram has lost out to Roti and basic concerns like livelihood, employment, social security and human dignity have come to the forefront. It is this direction of the developing situation that poses a much bigger danger to communal political forces than any self-styled opportunist electoral combination that may call itself secular. The Varanasi blasts have the mischievous potential of derailing this process and providing fresh fodder for the communal brigade.

This is why Varanasi demands a powerful intervention and prompt response from all progressive secular forces. It is heartening to note that the CPI(ML)'s timely intervention in Varanasi facilitated a series of encouraging popular initiatives. Activists of AISA organised a blood donation camp to help blast victims and of course remained vigilant against the evil designs of the Sangh outfits. Defying the blasts and the BJP's attempt to whip up communal tension, the CPI(ML)-led Rozgar Adhikar Abhiyan ended on a successful note in Varanasi on March 9-10. This provided a ready platform to the toiling masses and the secular progressive intelligentsia to demonstrate their resolve and strength, and the forces who wanted to use the blast victims to further their own sectarian and cynical political agenda were thwarted in their ugly bid.

After the Ayodhya events of December 1992, Comrade Vinod Mishra had led a march in Varanasi with the pledge never to allow Varanasi to become another Ayodhya. We must remember and redeem that pledge today like never before. Varanasi must be saved from becoming another Ayodhya, UP must be saved from being turned into a second Gujarat.

Vive 1968: Students and Workers on the Warpath in France!

'If they don't have secure jobs why aren't they grateful for insecure ones?': that seems to be French Prime Minister Dominic de Villepin's republican way of keeping alive the French Royal tradition of advocating cake for those demanding bread! A new law, called the CPE (First Employment Contract), introduced by de Villepin and enacted by the French Parliament, gives employers the right to fire workers under the age of 26 years, without citing any reasons, after two years. A blatant assault on the right to employment and job security? No: according to de Villepin's words in Parliament, the new law is a move to alleviate unemployment!

France has a shockingly high rate of unemployment - higher than most countries in Europe. Nearly 10% of the workforce is jobless; among workers under 25, the rate

of unemployment is 20%, and in some of the deprived suburbs, this amounts to 50%. These are the suburbs, where young non-white, non-Catholic people, many of them Black and Muslim are condemned to live with no hope of employment - and it is these suburbs that erupted a few months ago in fearful racial riots. Racial discrimination makes it almost impossible for those with 'Arab-sounding' names to land a job. The French PM claims he can't 'stand by and do nothing' while the young go jobless, and that the new law is a compassionate response to prevent the social disaffection and unrest stemming from joblessness. But such attempts to sell the law as a salve for the unemployed and racially discriminated has not worked: it has widely been recognised as a brutal official attempt to take advantage of the desperation of the jobless, to condemn them to insecure and exploitative work without any expectation of labour rights. Rather than alleviating racial discrimination, de Villepin seems to have counted on France's deeply ingrained racism to prevent mass outrage and protest against the law, hoping that the relatively more privileged students and established trade unions would not join ranks with the poor blacks of Arab origin.

It is a tribute to France's students, workers, and youth that they have baffled their rulers with a remarkable protest that is seen by many to revive the spirit of 1968. More than 60 of France's 84 state-run Universities are on strike - and the prestigious Sorbonne, epicentre of the 1968 student movement, is at the forefront. Students have boycotted classes for several weeks now; have organised massive sit-ins and have virtually taken over the Universities; and daily hundreds of thousands of students hit the streets in a variety of protests. Massive rallies of an estimated 4 lakh people - students, trade unions, workers - have been held. The protestors have faced violent repression and arrests at the hands of France's riot police. Undeterred by the consensus of France's ruling class on the law, the movement is now said to be considering a general strike.

The work-contract law seeks to disguise itself as a beneficent gesture towards the jobless. But is actually a cruel joke. It offers the young a ruthless choice - between hopeless unemployment and 'casual' work completely shorn of any legal protection. It forces the young 'reserve army' of labour to play musical chairs with jobs - allowing employers the full benefit of an endlessly flexible and desperate workforce. Effectively, it would also work as a threat against workers' protests, unionisation, and strikes. France's big business organisation, Medef, has advocated CPE-type work contracts for all workers - betraying that the real purpose of CPE is not to share jobs around, but to rob the working class of its hard-won historical protections and rights.

The French PM, also a leading Presidential candidate in the next General Elections, has refused to reconsider the CPE in any way; he has the full backing even of his leading political rivals and opposition. Whatever the immediate

outcome of the ongoing movement, it is bound to have far-reaching political consequences in France.

For us in India, the upsurge in France is a shot in the arm, an inspiration. Unemployment has assumed the proportions of an explosive crisis here. Contractualisation, casualisation, and new labour 'hire and fire' labour laws are the order of the day. If France's youth are being asked to accept contractual jobs with a built-in 'unemployment guarantee' as 'work', the very meaning of 'work' is being redefined in India. Among the rural poor on the brink of starvation, a glorified 'food for work' programme – of manual labour for just 100 days a year – is all that is being offered in the name of 'Employment Guarantee'.

Will India's workers, students, and youth unite to fight, like their counterparts in France? Will France's ongoing movement change the course of economic and political policy, or neo-liberalism and racism, in that country? We hope so!