

*Peasants of Punjab:*

## From Suicides to Struggle

*by a correspondent*

*[The following report is dated January 30, 2002. Since then several further developments have taken place. Nevertheless the report remains relevant.]*

Punjab peasants are on a course of struggle against the tragedy of peasant suicides resulting from the debt-trap in which they are caught.

Mithoo Singh, of village Sandoha, Mour block, district Bathinda, took a loan of Rs 80,000 four years ago from a commission agent (usurer), one Ashok Kumar of Mour Mandi (a small town). After two years, the commission agent compelled the peasant to take a bank loan for purchasing a new tractor and then to sell it immediately at a loss of Rs 50,000. The whole of the amount (of about Rs 1,83,000) received by the peasant from this distress-sale was still said to be pending. The next year the peasant had to sell a piece of his land, from which an amount of Rs 40,000 was paid to the money-lender. Yet the debt was not cleared. Last year, the commission agent again compelled the peasant to sign an application for another bank loan in the name of starting a dairy farm, and arranged for him a bank loan of Rs 1,50,000. The peasant was given Rs 90,000 by the bank as a first instalment of the loan. Out of this amount, the commission agent snatched Rs 15,000 saying that this was the amount paid as a bribe to the bank officer for the sanction of the loan; another Rs 15,000 was pocketed by him on the excuse of the "expense of paper-work". The remaining Rs 60,000 was 'adjusted' against debt arrears due from the peasant to the usurer. So the peasant did not actually get a single rupee from the bank loan. Rather, he was told that arrears of Rs

1,25,000 still stood against his name.

The worst was yet to come. The bank officers began their coercive operation to extract more bribes from the hapless peasant. The bank manager Surjeet Singh, along with the Land Valuation Officer (LVO), came to Mithoo Singh's village and scolded and insulted him publicly for not having bought buffalos with the bank loan, as he was supposed to have done according to the terms of the loan. He ordered the peasant to refund immediately the entire amount of Rs 90,000, and threatened to put his entire family behind bars if the amount was not deposited with the bank in a short specified period. Being publicly insulted and humiliated, and seeing no light at the end of the tunnel, he went into an acute depression. A member of Bharti Kisan Union (Ekta) from the same village, sympathising with his distress, kept track of these developments. He contacted a local leader of BKU (Ekta), apprehending that anything might happen to Mithoo Singh.

In the meantime the bank manager sent a threatening reminder to the peasant. The next day (May 29, 2001) Mithoo Singh ended his tragic life story by consuming pesticide.

Such stories no longer create a sensation in Punjab today. They have become a daily phenomenon. But this story was different in one respect: peasants under the banner of BKU (Ekta) reacted furiously to this development.

Hearing the news of Mithoo's suicide, about 150 peasants, members of BKU (Ekta) from nearby villages and Sandoha itself, rushed to his house. They carried his dead body in a protest demonstration to the police station at Mour Mandi. They agitated there for three hours and demanded that a criminal case should be registered against the commission agent and the bank manager for abetment in this suicide case.

Then, on June 8, about 1,000 peasants gathered at the condolence ceremony, where they resolved to launch a militant struggle to get their demands fulfilled. They demanded, apart from registration of a criminal case against the commission agent and the bank manager, that a compensation of Rs five lakhs should be given to the bereaved family and the whole of the outstanding debt payable to the commission agent and the bank should be remitted. Again on June 18 (2001) about 1,800 peasants held a dharna (sit-in protest) for a day in front of Mour Mandi police

station, in spite of the threats and provocative acts of commission agents and the threats issued by the police, who were heavily deployed there to check the dhama. (For a detailed report of these actions, see *Comrade*, Nos. 17-18, p. 90)

### Favourable and unfavourable factors

After a successful mass action of a one-day dhama (June 18, 2001), the leadership of the struggle analysed the objective and subjective situation, sorted out the favourable and unfavourable factors for the struggle and decided about the direction of the struggle.

The call given by the struggle-leadership for a militant struggle was getting an encouraging response from a considerable section of the peasantry of this area (Meur block) of Bathinda district. The leadership of BKU (Ekta) had the experience, capacity, confidence and prestige required to lead a protracted and militant struggle. BKU (Ekta) activists and supporters from Rampura, Phul, and Nathana blocks of the district, who had passed through the trying and tempering experience of militant struggles under severe police repression, were actively supporting this struggle. Peasants of Mour block and other areas were eager to advance the struggle not only because they sympathised with the bereaved family and their class brother Mithoo Singh; more than this, it was their own dreadful problem of being trapped in debt that impelled them. They saw that the issue of the struggle was not a personal issue of a family but a class issue.

As assembly elections were not far off, the ruling Akali Dal preferred not to use too harsh repressive measures against the peasants, who constituted their main electoral support base.

All these were favourable factors for transforming the acute anxiety of peasants regarding their debt problem, and their hatred of and rage against the usurers and the administration, into a militant and successful struggle. But there were also some unfavourable factors present in the situation.

The union structure and the peasants of Mour block were supposed to play the main role in this struggle. Though they were responding favourably, they were new to the experience of militant struggle and confronting police repression. So, in the initial stages of the struggle, they

needed to pass through relatively less militant, though assertive, forms of struggle.

Another unfavourable factor was the uneven balance of forces between BKU (Ekta) and the organised commission agents and businessmen, on the offensive. This was in response to the surging, militant peasant movement, with a revolutionary direction, under the leadership of a correct trend within the leadership of BKU (Ekta). The leaders of the commission agents were issuing press statements which were threatening, derogatory and insulting to the BKU (Ekta) leadership. They even attacked some BKU (Ekta) volunteers and tried to flare up physical clashes between peasants and commission agents and their supporters at Mour Mandi during the June 18 dhama.

The commission agents saw their usurious exploitation of the peasants threatened by the upsurge of this peasant movement. The major portion of their capital invested in usury would be lost if this peasant movement were to gain momentum instead of being crushed by police repression. Even in a very small mandi (a permanent market for agricultural commodities) the sum total of usurious capital of the commission agents runs into tens of crores of rupees.

With such money power they are easily capable of buying the support of bureaucrats, the police, and ruling class politicians. The Deputy Commissioner (the title of the head of a district administration in Punjab) of Bathinda is one of the most corrupt officers in the administration, with a personal relation with the commission agent Ashok Kumar.

These commission agents are heavyweights in ruling class parliamentary politics, due to their money power and due to their hold on Hindu urban voters. Their political say is comparatively much more in the present state government because BJP, a ruling partner of Akali Dal (B) vitally depends on commission agents — businessmen and urban Hindu votes under their influence.

In view of the nearing assembly elections, the BJP and Congress (I) leaders of *beopar mandals* (organisations of commission agents and traders) were contending with one another to project themselves as the only genuine defenders of the commission agents' interests and opponents of the peasant movement.

The ruling Akali Dal (Badal) was in a fix. It had a hard choice to

make. On the one hand were the negative electoral implications of unleashing police repression on the ongoing peasant movement. On the other, the BJP feared losing its base among traders, commission agents, and those urban Hindu voters under their influence if the peasant struggle were allowed to proceed unchecked. Therefore the BJP leaders were pressurising their big brothers, the Akali leadership, to nip in the bud the "evil" of the peasant movement. If the Akali leadership refused to take care of the BJP's interests to one extent or the other, the cracks in the ruling alliance would widen.

### Course of action

The following course of action was chalked out to make optimum use of the favourable factors and to neutralise the unfavourable factors.

As, in the immediate context, the balance of forces was in favour of the enemy of the struggle (the commission agents and their supporters) therefore a quick victory based on a few highly militant and decisive mass actions was not possible. The struggle would have to be of a protracted nature in order to get sufficient time to garner fighting strength by winning over comparatively backward sections of peasants and by helping intermediate sections to advance (in class consciousness and organisation).

It was thought that in the initial stage of the struggle elements of militancy should be gradually increased in struggle-activities to let those sections of BKU (Ekta) and other peasants, who are new to militant struggles and police repression, pass through a process to reach the required level of advanced militant peasant fighters. But the elements of assertion by the peasants must always be there to one extent or another even in peaceful forms of struggle, without which militant struggle cannot be built up.

Of the two important aspects of any struggle-activity — the militant form of struggle, and the massive participation of the people — the latter was to be specially emphasised. This would make it more difficult for the ruling Akali Dal to crush the struggle with police repression, for fear of the electoral implications.

In view of the forthcoming assembly elections, the struggle-leadership decided to mount an effective exposure campaign to shatter as much

as possible the peasant-friendly image of the Akali leaders and upset their electoral calculations. This indeed was the raw nerve of the Akali leaders.

As mentioned earlier, the motive force behind the active participation of the majority of peasants in this struggle was not only their sympathy with the bereaved family, but also their powerful urge to get themselves released from the debt-trap. So it was decided by the leadership of the struggle that this urge should be translated into some concrete demands concerning the debt problems of peasants. And these demands should be added to the charter of demands of the ongoing struggle. These newly added demands included a stop to the arrests of defaulter peasants; a ban on confiscation and auction of land and agricultural implements of defaulters; a drastic reduction in the interest rates of debt, especially of usurious debt of defaulter peasants; remission of all the arrears of interest which the peasants owe to the banks and private usurers; legally requiring the commission agents to issue account books to the debtor peasants on the pattern of banks, so that peasants can check their accounts and detect fraudulent calculations by the commission agents.

### Attempt to settle the issue through negotiation

While trying to carry on the struggle as long as possible, the struggle leadership was always prepared to settle the issues through negotiations. Accordingly they responded positively when the commission agent Ashok Kumar expressed his desire to negotiate. The leadership took the stand that the victimised peasant had already paid more than the total amount of the debt (principal plus interest). He was duped through false accounting and trapped in fraudulent bank loans by the commission agent. Therefore the peasant leaders demanded from the delegation of commission agents that they allow them to check the account books of Ashok Kumar, a demand Ashok Kumar and his supporters flatly rejected, under the plea that these account-books contained many other accounts. The truth was that there were many more skeletons in Ashok Kumar's cupboard, which he feared would come tumbling out. The peasant leaders then demanded that the commission agents give them photocopies of just those pages which contained the accounts of Mithoo Singh. Ashok Kumar and his supporters rejected even this demand, and so negotiations broke

down on this point.

This round of talks confirmed the culpability of the commission agent Ashok Kumar in Mithoo Singh's suicide, and justified the demand that a criminal case be registered against the agent.

### Advancing the struggle

After a one-day dhama on June 18 before the Mour Mandi police station, a call was given to burn effigies of Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh Badal and prime minister Vajpayee before the same police station, as a preparatory step for an indefinite dhama. Following an effective propaganda and agitation campaign, about 1200-1300 peasants (including women) gathered in the evening of July 4, at a main road, about two kilometres away from Mour Mandi. A large number of police were deployed to check the march of the peasants and ensure that they did not enter Mour Mandi. Apart from this, the district authorities had obtained court orders banning the entry into Mour Mandi of all important BKU (Ekta) leaders.

Police officers were adamant that the peasants would only be allowed to burn effigies at the place of the gathering and that they had to disperse and return to their villages. At this point two contrasting views emerged within the leadership of the struggle about what was to be done, i.e., whether the peasants should assert their right to assemble peacefully before the police station and burn effigies there, confronting the police threats boldly, or should surrender their democratic right and obey the police dictate to burn the effigies at the gathering spot and return to their villages. The peasants were polled on the spot to clinch the issue. The overwhelming majority expressed themselves in favour of defying the court orders and police threats.

Negotiations with the police officers and discussions among the peasants and the leadership took much time. By the time the decision was taken it was already 9 p.m. and the main road (linking Bathinda and Mansa district headquarters) had been blocked for five hours. The majority leadership representing the correct view decided neither in favour of a physical clash with the police to assert the peasants' democratic right of free assembly (that decision would have been inappropriate to the level of tactical preparedness of the majority of peasants participating

in the struggle) nor in favour of returning to their villages quietly, complying with the authoritarian orders of the district administration (that would also have been inappropriate given the assertive mood and will of the gathering). The leadership decided and declared that peasants would not return without burning effigies in front of Mour Mandi police station, that they would start their indefinite dhama on that spot (of course, blocking the main road) till they were allowed to enter Mour Mandi and to burn the effigies there. Peasants greeted the announcement of this decision with joy.

The officer in charge of the police station was on a hot line contact with the district administration. He was continuously sending information about the movements and decisions of the peasants and receiving instructions from higher ups. He, along with his forces, were standing at a distance to block the onward march of the gathering. After the district president of the BKU (Ekta) announced the decision of the peasants to sit in indefinite dhama on the road, the police officer called for the president to hold talks with him. The gathering rejected his summon and asserted that the president should not go near the police officers and should not risk arrest. (In the Jehuke struggle, the president had been arrested after calling for negotiations by the district authorities. The peasants had not forgotten that experience, and they were confident that the police would not dare to arrest their leaders from within their "security cordon". The president announced from the loudspeaker that the police officer could come to them, if he liked, for negotiations, rather than his going to the police officer. Accepting this offer, the police officer along with a group of policemen began to move towards the district president. Then the president announced that the group of policemen should not come near him, and that the police officer may come all alone; that he should not worry about his security, for which the leadership would be responsible. The police officer ordered his security men to pull back, and he went alone to meet the president. After negotiations, the president announced that the district authorities had decided not to check the peasants' march to Mour Mandi. The gathering entered the town roaring slogans, to the dismay of the commission agents. The townspeople watched curiously from their rooftops this militant march of peasants at the dead of night. This successful struggle-action gave a new fillip to the

morale and confidence of the peasants, which were spectacularly evident when they were victoriously burning effigies before the police station, deflating the threats of the commission agents and the police.

That action was a part of a more important and stepped-up struggle action — an indefinite dhama before the same police station — which was to be started on July 16, 2001. A concerted and well-organised exposure and agitational preparatory campaign was conducted. Trained and well-prepared BKU (Ekta) leaders conducted meetings of active union members, including women activists. Then they organised village level rallies and demonstrations and *jago*-processions. (In Punjabi, "*jago*" means "awake!". During marriage celebrations, at night a group of singing women move through the streets of the village calling out their friends. One of the women carries a metal pitcher decorated with fixed earthen lamps. As they sing the *jago* song, they exhort various people to get up. Now this traditional form is used to mobilise the people.)

In this mobilisation campaign peasant leaders explained and projected the justification of the demands of this struggle. They projected the seriousness of the current debt problem and its link to these demands. They emphasised the importance of a protracted and determined struggle. They tried to make the peasants see prospects of victory in the struggle by analysing the current situation. They also brought into focus the point that, but for the active and massive participation of peasants in all kinds of struggle activities and other responsibilities, not only would prospects of victory be destroyed but this movement itself could be turned back. During this campaign, the peasant leaders kept in mind that for the maximum possible mobilisation, it was necessary to locate and address the feelings, questions, doubts, and apprehensions about the struggle and its leadership which might be present as an undercurrent in the minds of the peasants. They kept in mind that in order to generate and maintain the peasants' close and deep concern with the struggle, every important development, consideration, issue and problem of the struggle should be shared with the peasants, in the idiom and language comprehensible to them.

### Resistance to the pre-emptive police attack

In order to pre-empt the July 16th struggle-action, the police raided

about a dozen villages and arrested about two dozen union leaders and activists on the night of July 15th. The district authorities were under the illusion that with these pre-emptive raids and arrests the whole plan of an indefinite dhama before the police station would come to nought. But this attack on the peasant leaders and activists proved counter-productive for the authorities.

The raiding police parties had to face an active resistance in many villages. In Jethuke village the police had to lathi-charge the peasants, including women who were resisting the arrests of their leaders. In an initial burst of angry reaction, the peasants present on the occasion repulsed the attack and even thrust the policemen into reverse gear. But before a large number of peasants could rush to the scene, the police party quickly picked up the union workers and fled the village. In another village, Kotra, the raiding police party, along with their five vehicles, were encircled for five hours by the village people (including women). A large contingent of police was rushed to the village under the command of a deputy superintendent of police (DSP). Only when the DSP assured the peasants that no one from the village would be arrested was the encircled police party allowed to leave the place. The district president of BKU (Ekta) was kidnapped by a group of policemen in plainclothes. They stuffed his mouth so that he could not raise slogans, in order that peasants may not gather to resist his arrest. He was secretly dumped in a remote police station.

On July 16, the day of starting the indefinite dhama, police set up barricades on all main roads leading to Mour Mandi to prevent peasant fighters going there. The previous night's police raids and arrests did not frighten the peasant masses as was expected by the district authorities; rather it stoked the fire of indignation and anger in their hearts. They were determined not to retreat from their decision of indefinite dhama, and hundreds of them were stopped at each police barricade.

Here again the peasant leaders had to face a difficult choice. They once again decided to start dhamas on many routes to Mour Mandi till they were allowed to gather at Mour Mandi police station. Traffic was thus blocked on all the main roads to Mour Mandi. The strength of the peasants was maximum in the dhama at a village named Maiser Khana on the main road from Bathinda to Mour Mandi and further to Mansa

(the district headquarters) This is an important road linking Punjab and Haryana. Then it was decided that all peasants sitting in dhama at various places should reach Maiser Khana to consolidate their forces. A large contingent of peasant fighters started to pull back from the police barricades, feigning that they were returning to their villages. In fact they were dodging arrest and making their way to Maiser Khana. They did so over the course of two days, travelling through many villages and carrying out propaganda and agitation there.

#### **Indefinite dhama — a schooling, agitational and struggle camp**

Now an indefinite dhama was started on the main road to Maiser Khana, instead of Mour Mandi. At least 1,500 peasants pitched their tents on the road, and this busy road was fully blocked. This massive dhama was encircled by a large number of police forces. This struggle camp was also converted into a big political schooling and agitational centre through almost continuous stage programmes and group meetings of peasants. Many propaganda and agitation teams were sent repeatedly to various villages to mobilise active support and aid for this struggle.

As a result newer groups of peasants participated in the dhama. Sometimes the strength of the dhama reached about 2,000. A community kitchen was set up at the venue of the dhama. People from villages near and wide were regularly sending prepared meals for this kitchen. Sometimes even *kheer* (rice cooked in milk) and *halva* were sent on a massive scale, enough for about 1,500-2,000 people to eat their fill.

Before this dhama, the unit of BKU (Ekta) in Maiser Khana was a weak one, but under the impact of this dhama and with the concerted efforts of the leadership of the struggle, almost the whole village was geared to active participation in the struggle.

As the dhama got prolonged, the news of the struggle was getting more and more front-page projection in the press. Since an important traffic route was continuously and seriously dislocated, and since the press was giving the issue continuous prominence, the struggle became a serious political concern not only for the district administration but also for the state government. The struggle was a thorn in their flesh. They ran the risk of a heavy political price both ways, ie, in case they did not use police repression with impunity and let the struggle build up, as well

as if they crushed the struggle with a heavy hand. Let alone the district administration, even in the state capital no one was deemed authorised to make such a hard choice: the chief minister was on a tour to the USA.

#### **A sabotage attempt**

The rulers tried a new idea to get out of this fix. Through some ministerial and bureaucratic channels, they successfully approached and prevailed upon a pliable section of the BKU (Ekta)'s state leadership to push through a proposal of a 'compromise', in an underhand fashion, and behind the backs of the actual leadership of the struggle. The struggle was being led by the Bathinda district committee of BKU (Ekta). The state leadership was not expected at all to negotiate any settlement of the struggle without consultation and approval by the district committee.

The proposed 'compromise' was just a fig-leaf to cover a sabotage of the struggle. According to this proposal the district authorities were supposed to fulfil two conditions for the withdrawal of the struggle, and one condition was to be fulfilled immediately after the withdrawal of the struggle.

The first condition was that an enquiry would be ordered by the district administration to find whether the commission agent and the bank manager are responsible or not for compelling the peasant to commit suicide. The second condition was that the district administration would recommend an amount of Rs 2.50 lakh as compensation to the bereaved family of the peasant who committed suicide, to be given by the state government from the fund that had been reserved (but not distributed to anyone till date) in the previous state budget, for families of peasants committing suicide under burden of debt. If the leadership of the BKU (Ekta) were to withdraw their struggle on these conditions, the district administration would release all the peasant leaders and activists arrested during this struggle.

Everybody knows that ordering an inquiry is a most worn-out tactic of the rulers to deflate the just indignation and rage of the people against any act of injustice. In this particular case the conclusions of any would-be enquiry were already known, because the bias of the district authorities in favour of the commission agent was already glaring and known. Moreover, conducting expeditiously an enquiry to ensure justice was the

duty of the administration; it could not be made a condition for withdrawal of the struggle. The ongoing struggle was in no way coming in the way of such an enquiry.

The meaning of the second condition was that, if the struggle were not withdrawn, the district administration would not even recommend the case for compensation as decided by the state government - such compensation is to be given to the families of all peasants who commit suicide under the burden of debt. And even if the struggle were withdrawn, the district authorities would only "recommend", and not ensure, the payment of compensation.

As for the third condition, all of the leaders and union workers had been arrested and booked under false charges. So they were to be released unconditionally. It was out-and-out blackmailing to enforce the withdrawal of the struggle as a condition for releasing the arrested union leaders and workers.

As already mentioned, the suggested 'compromise' was a ploy to withdraw the struggle without getting a single demand of the struggle fulfilled. So, naturally, it was vehemently rejected by the district committee and a large majority of peasants participating in the struggle. In this development, though the rulers did not succeed in their conspiratorial manoeuvres to get the struggle withdrawn without fulfilling any demand, they did succeed in causing a cleavage and sharpening the struggle within the state committee of BKU (Ekta). The pliable section of the state leadership, who intended to accept the so-called compromise and wanted to see the struggle concluded, felt hurt and challenged when the 'compromise' was resoundingly rejected by the leadership of the actual struggle and by the peasant fighters at large. Consequently, this negative development within the state leadership proved to be serious for the success of the ongoing struggle and for the unity of and integration of the leadership, as will be reported later on.

After about five days of the dhama, the district committee was considering an idea about changing the form of struggle. As the authorities seemed adamant and were not prepared to fulfil the demands of the struggle, it was thought necessary that the hundreds of peasants participating in the dhama should march en masse to the villages, and mobilise and arouse the peasantry on a bigger scale. After a round of propaganda

and agitational campaign, and with a multiplied number of aroused participants, again a suitable struggle-form should be adopted. But this idea was countered by a section of the district leadership, who emphasised that the sit-in at Maiser Khana should be continued until the fulfilment of the demands. The representatives of this opinion also happened to be supporters of the capitulationist compromise which had already been rejected by the majority of the district leadership and the overwhelming majority of peasants. So, in order to appear more militant than the others, they opposed the change in the form of struggle and insisted the dhama be continued.

When the State authorities failed to get their so-called compromise implemented, they began to play a fraudulent game. Outwardly they pretended to be anxious for a negotiated settlement of the struggle, but inwardly they were desperately waiting for the Punjab chief minister's return from the US to get a green signal to unleash police terror to crush the struggle. On the one hand, the district authorities requested the leaders of the Bathinda unit of Lok Morcha Punjab to act as mediators for a compromise between the leadership of the struggle and the district authorities. Lok Morcha leaders were urged to contact the struggle leadership and to find out about their terms for an agreement. At the same time the D.C. of Bathinda was summoned to Delhi to see the chief minister even before the CM returned to the state capital. On July 22, Lok Morcha Punjab leaders conveyed to the district authorities the terms of agreement sent by the leadership of the struggle. Lok Morcha Punjab leaders were given to understand by the district authorities that these terms were being considered seriously. But the Bathinda DC returned from Delhi on the night of July 22 after getting a green signal to go ahead for suppressing the struggle. Police pressure was stepped up from the same day.

### Unleashing repression

On July 22, police blocked the way of about 100 peasant volunteers carrying meals on tractor trollies for the public kitchen. The police officer in charge forbade the peasants from taking the meals to the dhama, and arrogantly ordered them to go back. But the peasants were not ready to obey him at any cost. The rebellious mood of the peasants provoked the police officer. He drew a line on the ground across their path, and

dared them to touch this line. A young peasant volunteer, accepting his challenge, and putting his foot on the line, declared that his leg may be broken but it would not be pulled back. The arrogant police officer broke the leg of the peasant with a heavy lathi blow and ordered a lathi-charge on the volunteers. The peasant volunteers, even though empty-handed, bravely fought and made the police party flee the scene. The police returned with reinforcements. Again the peasants resisted so determinedly and furiously that the deputy superintendent of police had to run for his security and his Gypsy (vehicle) and two security guards became the target of the wrath of the peasants.

Finally, when more police forces reached the scene, peasants took shelter in a nearby village (Mour Charat Singh) gurdwara, where usually police do not enter. The police arrested 11 people and the gurdwara was surrounded. Through a loudspeaker the whole population of the village was ordered not to come out of their houses, i.e. a de facto curfew was imposed on the village.

When the news of this development reached the venue of the dhama at Maiserkhana, the Bathinda district committee of BKU (Ekta) sent another volunteer team to Mour Charat Singh to get the peasant volunteers freed from the gurdwara surrounded by the police. The new team reached the village, made contact with the people, roused them and prepared them to face the police forces daringly. The village people boycotted the policemen and did not give them even a glass of water. They helped the new leading volunteer team to secretly enter the gurdwara complex and meet the peasants shut in the gurdwara. The leader of the new volunteer team roused and prepared the peasant volunteers to daringly face and struggle out of the police encirclement to reach Maiser Khana. Vows were taken not to fear any sacrifice and to fight the police forces determinedly. Thus this combat-ready contingent of peasant fighters came out of the gurdwara, stormed through the police lines and made its way to Maiser Khana at high speed. The police followed them for three kilometres till the peasant volunteers entered another village (Jatry). The police surrounded the whole village. But the village people actively supported the peasant volunteers and helped them escape safely from the police encirclement to reach Maiser Khana.

### A big clash

On the night of July 22, the district administration called an emergency meeting of police officers of the whole district to plan an attack on the dhama. The district leadership of BKU (Ekta) also got wind of these intentions and preparations of the district authorities. They also took emergency steps to resist the enemy's attack. The whole village of Maiser Khana was thoroughly mobilised and put into a combat-ready position to resist the impending police attack. Stones and bricks were stored on roof-tops of many houses to resist the aggressive police forces with an aerial attack. On their own initiative and planning the people of the village barricaded the outer openings of many village streets by overturning the trolleys of tractors.

The police raided many villages. It was expected that the venue of the sit-in would be attacked on July 23. The peasants remained vigilant and combat-ready throughout the night, but nothing happened until the morning. On the morning of July 24, a large number of peasants dispersed for their morning chores. There were only 500-600 peasants in the dhama camp when heavy police forces (about 500-600) attacked the venue. It was announced from the stage that all the nearby peasants and peasants of the village should rush to the venue to repulse the attack. Someone from Maiser Khana village announced from the village loud-speaker that everyone from the village should rush to the venue of the dhama.

The plan of the police was that the participants of the dhama should not be allowed to enter the village so that they may not hide themselves in the houses of the village. So a section of police forces was deployed to block the two entry points of the village, and a section was deployed around the village gurdwara to check the entry of peasants into the gurdwara. A big section of the police force attacked the venue of the sit-in.

Peasants present at the venue showered bricks and stones on the aggressors. On the other hand peasants from within the village ran towards the sit-in venue. They attacked and dispersed the policemen deployed to block the entry points. A third clash took place near the gurdwara. Police forces deployed there were thrashed by an attack from the roof-tops of nearby houses.



In this clash many policemen were severely beaten up and some of them were seriously injured. On the other hand policemen entered 22 houses of the village and beat, dragged and insulted these families. Even old persons, women and patients were not spared. In one case they sprayed pesticide on the wheat stock of the family to make it inedible. They broke furniture, refrigerators, televisions, tractors and many other costly articles of many families. A large number of people were arrested, many of whom were not participants in this clash and were arrested from their houses or fields. Out of the persons of this village who were put behind bars 39 were injured. Five of them sustained broken arms, two broken legs, and six head injuries. The total number of injured persons of all the villages who escaped arrest was much more. 118 peasants were sent to jail under various sections of the Cr.P.C., and many of them (including four women peasants) under sec. 307 (intention to commit murder). Arrest warrants were issued for almost the entire leadership of the district and block.

Though the number of peasants beaten and injured in this clash is more than that of policemen beaten or hurt, the peasants were feeling morally victorious and upbeat. It was a morale-boosting development for hundreds of peasants to dare collectively to resist the police attack and fight a pitched battle.

#### **Campaign to close ranks after the attack**

After the big clash, the peasant leadership correctly grasped the significance of quick and active intervention in the situation in order to close the ranks of the struggling sections and to counter the terror campaign carried on by the police through raids, arrests and framing of numerous persons.

Hectic efforts were made to contact victimised families and injured persons, as well as to contact the activists who had gone underground to escape arrest and continue activity. This task was difficult for the peasant leaders who had warrants on them to fulfil even as police parties were hounding them. This task was even more difficult for that section of peasant leaders who were not well versed in underground working. Activists of Lok Morcha Punjab, particularly women activists, made a good contribution in this task. Problems and needs of victimised families

were located and creditably solved or fulfilled. Agricultural work (eg pesticides or hoeing) in the fields of those on whom there were warrants, or who were arrested/injured, was done collectively with the help of peasants of the same village and nearby villages. Special efforts were made to train the hunted leaders and activists in underground work under repressive conditions. Arrangements were made to systematically supply milk and other items of daily use for more than one hundred jailed peasants. Legal arrangements were made to fight the cases of all arrested and framed persons. Of course, along with all these efforts, a hectic and intensive exposure and mobilisation campaign was conducted to organise the activities of protest and resistance to the ongoing police repression.

The results of these efforts and arrangements were very fruitful. A big majority of villages, families and persons seriously victimised by police repression steadfastly stood with the union and the struggle. More encouraging was the fact that a major section of the peasants who were new to such trying repressive conditions urged the peasant leadership to step up the struggle.

#### **Successful protest rally**

After the clash of July 24, the leadership of the struggle was taken over by the state committee of BKU (Ekta). This was a turning-point in the struggle — between the correct trend and the wrong trend. The implications of this turning-point will be reported later on. A call was given by the state committee to reach Mour Mandi on August 1, to protest against the police attack on the peaceful dharna of peasants.

Sukhbir Singh Badal, an ex-Central minister (now an M.P.) and son of the Punjab Chief Minister, visited the area of Rampura block, which is a stronghold of BKU (Ekta). Under the pretext of his security, hundreds of policemen marched through those villages to terrorise and prevent the peasants from taking part in the protest rally. On August 1, about 4,000 peasants tried to reach Mour Mandi from various directions but the mobile police parties, police barricades and check posts on all routes did not allow all of the peasants to reach Mour Mandi. About 500 peasant agitators were encircled in a village (Kotra Korianwala) of Rampura block for the whole day by a hundred policemen. About 1,000 peasants were

detained at various places. And about 3,000 peasants succeeded in reaching about two kilometres from Mour. They organised a protest rally at this place on the main road to Bathinda and jammed the traffic for many hours. They warned the Bathinda administration from the stage that the peasant agitators encircled by the police at Kotra should be immediately released, failing which a big contingent of peasant fighters would be sent to the village to break open the police siege and free the peasants. A senior police officer present at the protest rally assured the peasant leaders that the encirclement would soon be ended. But after getting information that the promise given by the police officer was not being fulfilled, a few hundred peasants riding trucks rushed to the besieged village. As soon as the besieged peasants got information that a reinforcement had reached the village periphery/boundaries to break the siege, they, carrying sticks and the like, rushed headlong onto the police forces, even as the leaders of the reinforcements were still arguing with police officers to lift the siege. The police forces, seeing themselves sandwiched between two sets of agitated peasants, immediately ended the siege.

This protest rally was a litmus test for the rulers to see whether or not they were successful in crushing the struggle with repression. The response and participation of the peasants in this rally proved that they had refused to be terrorised. After the clash of July 24, the chief minister of Punjab, in a press statement declared arrogantly that no one would be allowed to take the law into his own hands, and that those who were a law unto themselves would be dealt with sternly. But just a few days after the protest rally, the chief minister's son, a de facto ruler of Punjab, said in a statement that everybody has a democratic right to hold rallies and demonstrations. The shift between the two statements was very clear. This shift indicated that the rulers' litmus test showed they had failed.

On August 14, a massive and long (two-day) protest march was organised through the important villages of Rampura Phul and Mour blocks of Bathinda district. The villages and areas that came under police repressive campaign were given particular importance. A convoy of about 60 vehicles (tractor-trolleys, jeeps, trucks, etc) carrying about 1700-2000 slogan-shouting peasants toured numerous villages. Almost everywhere this militant protest march was greeted by the village peasants with sur-

prising excitement and happiness. They welcomed the marchers with slogans. At many places some of them were heard saying, "Now, no one can defeat the peasants". "Look, tens of thousands of peasants had come from far and wide to support our struggle". On the night of August 14, the whole convoy stayed at a village (Chak Fatah Singh Wala) and about 2,000 persons were served tea, dinner and breakfast (next morning). Women folk of this village fully stretched themselves to feed such a big number of persons and 70 male volunteers also served in the kitchen. This was the first experiment by BKU (Ekta) of carrying so large a contingent of demonstrators and agitators to the doors of the people. This action wiped out the vestiges of terror of police repression among the people.

On August 22, a week after the massive protest march, peasants from many districts of Punjab organised a militant march on the roads of the state capital, Chandigarh, to protest against the police attack and to get the demands of the struggle fulfilled. About 4,000 peasants (including women) participated in this protest rally. This gathering, expressing keen anxiety to be liberated from the debt-trap, a militant and fighting mood, and determination, was the biggest ever in the state capital organised by BKU (Ekta) alone.

To depict the resultant effect of this struggle, particularly of the mass resistance of the police attack, on the minds of the struggling peasants and on their organisation, it is useful to briefly report an incident that had earlier occurred at village Maiser Khana, after the police attack of July 24.

A peasant of this village owed a huge debt to a commission agent of Mour Mandi. He was compelled to sell a piece of land to the money-lender commission agent. This was a secret deal. Publicly he was the owner of the land and he kept cultivating this land on rent. Every year he had to pay the rent secretly to the moneylender. Encouraged by this struggle this peasant refused now to pay rent as well to hand over the piece of land to the commission agent. The commission agent thought of exploiting the situation prevailing after the police attack on the village, in which village people were supposed to be terror stricken. (Commission agents of Mour Mandi were overjoyed to hear the news of a severe and massive attack on the struggling peasants and their organisations. There

were press reports that the commission agents distributed sweets and fruits among policemen after the attack.) The commission agent came to the village at night along with a harvester combine, two tractors and a gang of gun-wielding hired goons. They began to harvest the paddy in the disputed piece of land. The news of this forcible act of plunder spread in the village like wildfire. Someone issued a call from the loudspeaker to the village people to immediately rush to the field and collectively resist the forcible reaping of the paddy. The response was very quick and sharp. Peasants of the village, carrying sticks and other traditional weapons, reached the fields in no time and challenged the commission agent and his gang of gunmen. This was such an unexpected and bewildering development for the commission agent and his party that they spontaneously fled the scene, leaving behind the harvester combine, tractor-trolleys, etc. (as well as a large number of bottles of an alcoholic to let the peasants celebrate their victory!). The peasants gave vent to their rage by striking at the combine and tractors and destroying the breakable parts. The commission agent did not dare, for a long time, to retrieve his combine and tractors, which were left in the paddy field. Seeing the mood and preparedness of the peasants, the police registered a non-bailable criminal case against the intruder commission agent.

### **The struggle continues, but...**

As mentioned earlier, the state committee's taking over of the leadership of the struggle from the Bathinda district committee was a turning point in the struggle. Though this (seven and a half month long) struggle is still going on, with this turning point, however, the struggle within the leadership of BKU (Ekta) outstripped the struggle of the peasants against the commission agents and district administration. This development not only decreased the momentum of the struggle of the peasants against class enemies and marred the chances of its success, but also posed a danger to the unity of BKU (Ekta). This inner-union struggle, which has actually sharpened since then, is nevertheless indicative of the growing strength of the correct trend within the leadership of the BKU (Ekta). It thus needs a separate report to deal with it.

— January 30, 2002

## *State Leadership Attempts to Foist Split on BKU* **Re-organised BKU, A Step Forward**

*-- by a correspondent*

The Bharti Kisan Union (Ekta), which has established itself as the leading peasant organisation of Punjab through a series of militant mass struggles, has split. The split was formalised in the state conference of the BKU (Ekta) held in Jethuke village, Bathinda district, on June 8. Another section of the BKU (Ekta) has declared it intends to hold its conference soon.

As a rule, a split in a mass organisation is an unwelcome development. It is a common experience that when mass organisations split, the ranks of the concerned organisation are left disheartened, confused and passive, even if their leaders are satisfied with the result. However, quite to the contrary, in this case the ranks have welcomed the split as a necessary development for the advance of the organisation. Not only have the vast bulk of the ranks (including all active struggle-areas) been united in the re-organised body, but the ranks have been enthused to raise their level of participation and commitment.

What is the reason for this positive development? To understand it, it is necessary to study the entire process culminating in this split. (This has been covered in part in *Comrade* nos. 2, 9, 11-12, 13-14, and 15-16, 17-18, and elsewhere in this issue.) In fact, it is not a split in the true sense of the word. While the wrong trend in the BKU (Ekta) wanted to foist a split on the union, what instead took place was a polarisation and re-organisation of the union on a higher plane.

### **Background of BKU's development**

The BKU (Ekta) was itself the product of a long struggle to uphold

the positive aspects of the BKU as it was originally formed in 1984. Originally, the BKU, albeit led by rich peasant sections and even some feudal elements, was able to attract the vast peasant masses because it adopted certain norms: relying mainly on organised and mobilised strength of the peasant masses for getting demands accepted, and adopting militant forms of struggle; not allowing political parties to use the platforms of the union, and remaining aloof from parliamentary elections; at the same time, opening its doors to peasant activists from all political streams, and allowing them to play their role at different levels according to their work in the union; maintaining the secular character of the union (both in its constitution and its practice); and so on. During the peak of its influence, the original BKU was able to mobilise tens of thousands of peasants for its economic demands. Although its character was reformist-economist, in conditions where there was no scope for revolutionary forces to set up an influential independent peasant organisation, BKU provided them scope to form links with the peasant masses, gather force and set up the infrastructure to set up a revolutionary democratic peasant organisation in the future.

However, as the leadership of BKU began violating the basis of the organisation, the union went into decline. The faction led by Lakhawal for some time continued to uphold the original norms, as a result of which the revolutionary democratic forces continued to work on that platform. However, later the leadership of the Lakhawal-led body too began changing the union's basis, by aligning with parliamentary parties, discarding the union's secular basis, and abandoning struggle-orientation for manoeuvring with top officialdom. Finally the Lakhawal leadership tried to convert the union into a platform for propagating the communal-fascist Khalistani politics, altogether abandoning the peasant demands. In all this, the revolutionary democratic forces became an obstacle for them. The leadership thus dropped all pretences to democratic functioning, resorted to manufacturing bogus membership and nominated posts, and finally victimised and ejected the leading revolutionary and democratic activists, even at the cost of removing the most active forces of the union. These leading activists took the initiative in September 1994 to re-organise the BKU on its original basis – remaining aloof from political parties and elections, maintaining the secular character of the union, re-

establishing the mass-struggle orientation of the union, and practising democratic functioning in the union. The re-organised body, which adopted the name BKU (Ekta), undertook to form fraternal links with other mass organisations of the peasants and other sections of the people.

Given the greater weight of revolutionary democratic forces in the BKU (Ekta), there was greater scope for protection of the set norms and serious advance of the peasant movement via this platform. From its inception in September 1994, for the next five years or so, the BKU (Ekta) was engaged in a struggle to establish itself vis-à-vis the Lakhawal-led BKU, and to win over those pro-peasant sections still in the latter body. This task it achieved successfully by 1999.

#### Basic difference of approach

However, the problem now staring the organisation in the face was how to actually build the peasant movement, which was facing stagnation and routinism. Two approaches broadly emerged in the BKU (Ekta). The first was to function the union as a *propaganda-based organisation*, in the form of demonstrations, memorandums to the authorities, and the like. Further, it was felt that through joint activities with some political platforms, the peasant masses would become politicised and thus increase their participation in the union. It was felt by the proponents of this approach that through such joint activities more activists would be generated for the union, which was facing a scarcity of such activists.

The second approach, the correct trend within the BKU (Ekta), argued for focussing on *building struggle-activities on basic and burning peasant demands*, and introducing political consciousness in the union in accordance with the level of the peasants' actual activity and experience. While all political forces were free from their independent platforms to influence peasants politically, the experiences acquired by the peasant masses in struggle would be crucial to their being able to actually absorb any such political propaganda, (see *Comrade* no. 9) New activists for the union would be generated primarily in the course of the development of the union's struggle-activity.

This difference – between building a propaganda-oriented organisation and a struggle-based one – underlay the struggle within the BKU (Ekta). When, in the 1999 conference of the BKU (Ekta), the leaders of the

wrong trend produced bogus membership and on that basis captured top offices of the organisation, it became clear that, in their contention with the correct trend, the wrong trend would revive the wrong organisational practices of the Lakhawal period. The correct trend raised and discussed this issue, but it did not press it to the breaking point. It instead focussed on building an alternative *practice*, without which the peasant ranks would not be able to grasp and participate in the political struggle between the two trends.

Step by step, the correct trend was able to meet this objective. For some seven or eight months before the Jethuke struggle erupted, the peasants in certain pockets had been brought into smaller agitations, on the initiative of the activists of the correct trend. The most important of these was the mass gherao of a land mortgage bank in Rampura, following which it was announced that for the next six months no arrests would be made of any defaulting peasants. Through such actions, the correct trend was able to point to certain burning issues of the peasantry, reveal the enthusiasm of the peasant masses for action on such issues, and show the scope for winning struggles on these issues through militant mass mobilisation.

#### **Difference of approach seen in practice**

The difference between the two approaches was expressed in a sharp form during the Jethuke struggle, which began in January 2000 (see *Comrade* nos. 13-14). There the correct trend, represented in the Bathinda district committee, was actually conducting an agitation on which the police carried out serious repression, culminating in a police firing. The correct trend was determined to overcome the repression, win certain repression-related demands and to achieve the original aims of the struggle. The wrong trend, represented by the majority of the top office-bearers of the state committee, decided that the struggle was of no significance, and that all that could be achieved was a propaganda campaign against the repression. For this purpose they foisted an 'Action Committee' – including not only some revolutionary groups' political platforms, but all ruling class parliamentary opposition parties. This Action Committee, they declared, would hereafter not only support the struggle but *conduct* it. In this Committee the district committee of the BKU (Ekta) was in the

minority, while political parties were in the majority. The correct trend had to wage a tortuous battle against this unjustifiable decision in order to carry the movement to success.

The Jethuke struggle marked a turning point in the recent peasant movement of Punjab. For large sections of peasants, including those out of the fold of the organisation, the name 'Jethuke' came to signify the sort of fight needed to solve their problems. It thus provided peasants a glimpse of the correct trend in practical terms. Inevitably, this led to sharpening of the struggle within the BKU (Ekta). The state-level office-bearers of the union began a systematic and motivated effort to block and disrupt the mass activities of the correct trend.

The victorious conclusion of the Jethuke struggle (June 2000) was closely followed by the struggle for ensuring paddy procurement (October 2000). In the statewide peasant upsurge over the refusal of the government agencies to procure paddy, the forces of the correct trend focussed on certain pockets, where they had sufficient base, to set up examples of struggle that would influence wider sections of peasants. In the statewide programme of actions to compel procurement (including stopping train traffic at various places), however, the top state office-bearers attempted to donate a list of sites excluding the strongholds of the correct trend, particularly Bathinda, and attempted to portray any effort at blocking tracks at *additional* places a violation of discipline.

The Bathinda district committee tackled this by assuring them that, in addition to blocking the tracks at Rampura in Bathinda, they would send as many peasants as the state leadership required to block tracks at the spot fixed by the state committee, which was 15 kms away, in Sangrur. In this fashion the correct trend was able to put up some striking examples of militant mass action *sustained till the achievement of the demands*. These examples provided inspiration to peasants over a much wider area. Whereas in the strongholds of some of the top state-level office-bearers, there was no action worth the name. In Patiala, for example, from where the state secretary hailed, and which according to the (bogus) membership records had the highest membership, rail traffic was blocked in a purely token and symbolic fashion, and the blockade was lifted in no time. (At this action seven state committee members and three top office-bearers, including the state president, presided.) Through

such concrete experience, the peasants were able to make out the difference between the different trends. They also associated the different trends with different prominent activists who promoted them.

The leaders of the wrong trend were finding this difficult to tolerate. During the Jethuke struggle itself, apart from attempting to snatch away the right to conduct the struggle, the top office-bearers threatened action against those leading activists, such as the state vice-president from Moga, Sukhdev Singh Kokri, who had been at the forefront of organising the resistance. Among the charges levelled against him was that he had links with a revolutionary group and had written an article in a revolutionary paper – the same type of allegation earlier levelled by the Lakhawal clique.

### Debt question, line of demarcation

In particular, the peasants began differentiating between the two trends on the question of peasant indebtedness to usurious commission agents. The proponents of the correct trend had, for some time, made a systematic effort to focus on this issue. In doing so, they touched upon a matter of such urgent importance to the peasant masses that it unleashed their struggle-potential. Indeed, one of the main reasons for the strength of peasant response to the Jethuke struggle was that peasants correctly perceived the attack on the bus-fare agitation as an attempt to crush their organisation; and moreover that if their organisation were crushed, *they would not be able to fight on the debt question*. Keeping this in mind, the Jethuke struggle-leadership continuously emphasised, in its speeches, leaflets, and literature, the need for struggle on the debt question, and that such a struggle would immediately follow upon the successful conclusion of the Jethuke agitation.

Even before Jethuke, the BKU (Ekta) had carried out a few agitations on this issue, but they had not been taken to their logical conclusion. It was with the agitation in 2001 over the Sandoha suicide case (see previous article) that a sustained, militant mass struggle emerged before the peasant masses. Here the contrast became even more glaring. The Bathinda district committee had taken up the case and organised the resistance even in the face of severe police repression (the police attack at Maiserkhana). At this point the 'state committee' (ie, in practice, the

top office-bearers) instructed the district committee to give up leadership of the struggle to the state committee.

The difference became strikingly evident to the organisation's ranks. The state leadership called for a rally at Chandigarh, in January 2001, after the Maiserkhana incident in which the Akali government had lathi-charged the peasant demonstrators. At this rally, the state president, Pishoura Singh, praised the Akali government as a "kisan government". He even called the Punjab agriculture minister Gurdev Badal to the stage of the rally, and praised him, sternly warning those in the audience raising slogans against him.

The wrong trend has been advancing some theoretical justifications for its sabotage of the struggle against usury. According to the proponents of the wrong trend, the issue of usury has been blown out of proportion. The commission agents, according to them, are small fry; the real enemy is imperialism. Inevitably, this means that there is no immediate struggle to be carried out, and the immediate programme is only propagating against imperialism. Those calling for a struggle against usurers, they charge, are not only diverting from imperialism but unnecessarily thrusting peasants into situations where they have to face bullets and lathis. (A further shade within the ruling alliance are those who say that "We too take up the issue of peasant indebtedness to commission agents. But we have a policy of give and take -- working out an understanding with the commission agents, whereby the peasant agrees to pay some part of the debt. The peasant must agree to pay something.")

The proponents of the correct trend agree with the need to carry out general propaganda against imperialism. However, it is necessary to go further, and actually carry out struggles at the points where imperialism directly affects people. For example, it is not enough to propagate against the WTO's pressure to wind up the procurement and rationing system. It is also necessary to wage a peasant struggle to compel the government to carry out procurement. Similarly, it is necessary not only to show how imperialist exploitation takes place through the terms of trade. Secondly, the sharpest emphasis will still be on anti-feudal struggles, such as the struggle against usury. That in fact is crucial in the last analysis to the development of the anti-imperialist struggle.

In line with its understanding of the debt issue, the state leadership,

having grabbed the leadership of the Maiserkhana agitation autocratically from the Bathinda district committee, simply dropped the agitation altogether. When asked at the state committee meeting for the next action on the issue, the state president simply said, "We have lost." Such direct struggles are to be replaced by general propaganda on remunerative procurement prices and on the WTO.

#### State leadership takes steps to split the organisation

For a considerable length of time the leaders of the wrong trend appear to have been contemplating throwing out the proponents of the correct trend, effectively splitting the organisation. However, the latter forces were careful not to give the former any such opportunity, which would have severely damaged the peasant movement as a whole. At the same time, the state top leadership wanted, to avoid being associated with the act of splitting the organisation, for which they would earn widespread condemnation. Moreover, they did not enjoy a majority in the state committee (which contains, besides the state-level office-bearers, the president and secretary of each district committee).

In September 2001, this position changed, as a prestigious leader of Mansa district, Ruldu Singh, senior vice-president of the union, switched sides, for reasons we will mention later. At the same time, Ruldu Singh brought in a pocket of mass following, which the state office-bearers had hitherto lacked. Now they were ready to attack the correct trend.

On November 11, 2000, at a special meeting of the state committee, Sukhdev Kokri was removed from his (elected) post. No show-cause notice was issued; nor was he told orally why he was being removed; he was allowed neither to answer the charges nor appeal the action. A press statement was issued by the state committee stating the following: (i) he was guilty of factional activity in the Maiserkhana agitation; (ii) in the Jethuke struggle, he acted behind the back of the state committee, compromised, and let the police chief off the hook; (iii) he sabotaged the possible compromise in Maiserkhana, prevented the lifting of the dharna, and spoke openly from the stage against the state leadership; (iv) at the same time, he let the guilty SSP in Maiserkhana off the hook, and collaborated with the police; and so on. (In support of this allegation, the state committee claimed that Sukhdev Kokri deliberately had not been

charged by the police in the Maiserkhana case – which claim was later proved false.)

The reckless step of the state leadership sent shock waves through the organisation. Sukhdev Kokri was in fact seen by the ranks as an outstanding fighter, at the forefront of the major struggles. Several district committees quickly held special meetings upon hearing of the action. Four committees wrote to the state committee, asking what exactly the charges were. They pointed out that, for instance, points (iii) and (iv) above were contradictory.

The state committee was forced to issue formal notice in the next meeting. A completely fresh set of charges was issued against Kokri, with no mention of the earlier ones. The new ones were much vaguer: (i) continuous violation of organisational decisions from May 1999 to the Maiserkhana struggle; (ii) instigating revolt against, and spreading hatred against, the state committee; (iii) carrying on factional activities upto the village level, while ignoring his assigned state-level duties; (iv) setting up a parallel centre against the state committee.

#### Correct trend fights to defend unity

Among political circles, this was widely seen as a precursor to a split in the union. Among the forces of the correct trend, and among their allies, there were a variety of reactions to this development. Some sections called for an immediate exit from the organisation, saying there was no longer any scope for work within it. A second section, generally at the village level, pressed for staying in, saying that "the wrong trend will be unable to harm us". A third section was apprehensive that the organisers of the correct trend would now take precipitate steps towards a split, and hoped somehow to keep working with a low profile in the organisation.

At this point, the proponents of the correct trend issued a statement. They asserted that there would be no split. At the same time they praised the role played by , and asserted that the charges against him were baseless. Yet they would continue to work within the existing organisation. This statement was widely appreciated among the ranks of the organisation. The forces of the correct trend were congratulated and the state leadership was criticised.

At the same time, the organisers of the correct trend discussed three aspects with their supporters and allies. (i) The need to maintain the unity of the organisation was explained. In some areas, the polarisation between the two positions was clear; but at certain other places there was still scope for confusion about certain of the leaders of the wrong trend. A split in such circumstances could bring about confusion and demoralisation. Some allies of the correct trend could become passive. (ii) A clear reckoning was made of the position of the two contending forces, in terms of areas of work, strength, and prestige. It was shown that the correct trend was certain to be victorious. The question was posed: "if we (the correct trend) force the issue, are we in a position to take the organisation forward? The answer is yes; our integrated strength is such that they cannot crush us. We are the essential organisation." (iii) The question was posed: "Will the removal of our leading activists from their posts by the ruling alliance weaken us, or strengthen us?" The answer was the latter. The peasant ranks, who knew well the worth of the activists of the correct trend, would be able to perceive the issues even more clearly, and at any rate the leading activists of this trend could concentrate further on local level work. As a result, the ruling alliance would have to pay a much higher price in public sympathy, and would have to disband the district committees.

Thus the organisers of the correct trend called for propagating that "There will be no split. The struggle will continue."

At the same time, however, there was to be no defensiveness in the face of the wrong trend. The charges levelled by the ruling alliance were to be exposed. Its real role, methods, intent, and violations of discipline were to be fully exposed in a propaganda offensive. In group meetings with peasant activists, the case made out by the ruling alliance was thoroughly discussed, showing how there was not an iota of truth to it.

In the actual conduct of the campaign, flexibility was shown. In certain areas, where concrete application of the correct understanding was already considerably advanced, the exposure was sharp. In other areas, the presentation and stress of different points was different. At places where the movement was at a relatively low level; it was simply asked, "Why this action, when we need unity?" At different places, it was carefully worked out as to which leader or activist could put which point most

effectively, and responsibility for speaking in the discussion groups was accordingly distributed.

An important role was played in this period by up-to-date oral reporting of all the group meetings among the entire network. In this fashion, through hectic and systematic efforts, the main force of the union was met and convinced of the correct trend's stand. Moreover, this force was prepared for what the leaders of the wrong trend were likely to do in the coming days.

### Ruling alliance receives a shocking rebuff

The ruling alliance, by contrast, was over-confident of its position. Given the general backwardness of peasant consciousness, their difficulty in standing up to established leaders, and the comparatively established figure of the state president, they arrogantly believed that they would be able simply to overawe the district committees into rubber-stamping their action. So they announced that the state leadership team would now visit each district committee and explain its decision.

The tour turned out to be a resounding slap in the face of the state leadership. Six of the nine districts they visited disapproved of the action. In the Bathinda district committee meeting, nearly 100 activists put the state leadership in the dock and exposed its stand. In Ferozepur the district committee at the same time invited the removed vice-president to defend himself against the charges, which he did to their satisfaction. Similar rejection awaited the leadership in Sangrur, Moga, Muktsar, and Ludhiana. (The ranks were also aware that, of the remaining districts, in Patiala and Fatehgarh Sahib there was no mass base; only in Mansa was there a mass base associated with the opposing trend.)

The clear conclusion emerged for the ranks: the leadership has no basis for taking such a step; it is a planned step to weaken the struggle-oriented trend, to split and desert the struggle; the leadership is being boldly confronted by the correct trend. In the meetings, the leaders of the correct trend challenged the state leadership: we are ready for your actions, we won't allow a split, even if you remove more of us. We have faced such actions till now, and we will continue to do so. From the stand of the correct trend the ranks saw that the struggle was not for leadership positions, but for whether or not to carry on a struggle-movement.



The peasant ranks felt reassured that, come what may, the union would continue.

The fiasco of the leadership's district tour did not make them reverse their course. In the January 1, 2002 state committee meeting the state president brazenly claimed that only two districts opposed the action. The action would not be re-considered. Five important district office-bearers were issued warning on the ground that, though they were also state committee members, they did not defend the state committee in these meetings. The state committee had been insulted.

Here it is necessary to cover an important development which had earlier been mentioned, and which played a major role in the wrong trend deciding to launch its attack. Ruldu Singh, the state senior vice-president of the union, hailing from Mansa district, had earlier broadly allied with the correct trend in the contention in the state committee, and as a result there was a majority opposed to any attack on the correct trend. While he had serious shortcomings (he had called off certain agitations on the basis of flimsy compromises reached with top officials, and during the Maiserkhana struggle he had allied with the ruling alliance in the union, and pressed for a compromise), he had a significant mass base and a militant mass image.

However, this leader appeared to have fallen prey to the allurements of electoral politics, and around September 2001 he joined the CPI(ML) Liberation (a revisionist group competing with CPI-M in parliamentary cretinism). In itself such a choice would not have posed a problem for BKU (Ekta); but he promptly grossly violated organisational discipline by organising a peasant conference of BKU (Ekta) in Mansa, and converting the same occasion to the all-India conference of the peasant organisation of CPI(ML) Liberation, thus effectively affiliating BKU (Ekta) to it. While the ruling alliance in BKU (Ekta) would under normal circumstances have been inimical to such an action, they winked at it in order to welcome one more member to their unprincipled faction. This was the precursor to further serious violations similarly winked at by the top office-bearers.

#### **Tricky move of the state leadership**

The ruling alliance in the union realised that, if the correct trend was

allowed to participate properly in the conference process, it would command an easy majority. Hence they resorted to a tricky move. The date of the state assembly elections was declared to be February 13. They knew from past experience that the correct trend would want to use the occasion of assembly elections to sharpen ongoing struggles (in particular the Maiserkhana struggle) and expose the ruling class parties; in particular the ruling party would stand to suffer from the sharpening of the struggle. So they declared at a special meeting of the state committee that for the BKU conference membership recruitment and block elections should be completed by February 28.

There were two possibilities: First, the forces of the correct trend might expend their strength on membership recruitment and let go of the opportunity to sharpen the assembly-election-time exposure and struggle; in which case the Akali government, to which the BKU (Ekta) president was close, would benefit. On the other hand, if the forces of the correct trend put their strength behind the election-time exposure campaign, they would be unable to complete their recruitment drive, and would suffer in the conference process. When the leaders of the correct trend argued against this setting of dates, and pressed for an extension till mid-March, the state leadership refused, without providing any reasons.

So it was decided by the correct-trend forces to carry out both tasks, by rising to the challenge. In Bathinda district, till February 13, the emphasis was to be on the struggle. Vote-seeking candidates were gheraoed at three places. When, in Kotra, BKU members went to confront Sikandar Singh Malluka (the Akali minister who was the main culprit behind the scenes in the Jethuke episode), they were lathi-charged by the police. In Bhaini Bagha (Mansa), too, there was confrontation with the police and arrests. In Talwandi Sabo constituency, in which Sandoha and Maiserkhana fall, a Congress leader who supported the commission agents during the recent struggle was gheraoed. (Both he and the Akali leader from the constituency lost, and an independent candidate won.)

#### **Ruling alliance throw understanding on parliamentary elections to the winds**

Meanwhile, Ruldu Singh, the BKU senior vice-president from Mansa who joined CPI(ML) Liberation, threw all norms of the union to the

winds. He carried on an undisguised campaign for the CPI(ML) Liberation candidate in Mansa assembly constituency, one Rajvinder Rana. He put the BKU (Ekta) funds, banner and activists at the service of Rana. At the time of elections, he put up BKU polling booths for Rana. At one rally, he had CPI(ML) banners placed on BKU (Ekta) trucks, and he spoke from the BKU stage openly on behalf of Rana. When a speaker from the correct trend opposed this from the same stage, the state president was forced to agree that this was wrong. The state secretary was also present at the same rally. However, in the following state committee meeting, the state president, secretary, and other top state level leaders maintained a complete silence about Ruldu Singh's blatant trashing of all organisational norms. This was because he was now crucial to their splittist plans.

After the assembly elections, and indeed even during them, the activists of the correct trend worked day and night to complete their recruitment drive. They realised that if the real membership strength of the correct trend got recorded, they would win easily. If the chieftains of the wrong trend still wished to defeat the correct trend, they would have to carry out such a huge bogus recruitment in Patiala and Fatehgarh Sahib that they would get thoroughly exposed.

#### **Unexpected results of the block elections, shock to the ruling alliance**

After having set the deadline of February 28, and after the correct trend had already completed its election process at the block level, the ruling alliance on the last date extended the date to March 16, to allow its own forces more time. Of course, while the activists of the correct trend submitted proper records and handed over the full membership fee collection, running into lakhs of rupees, the ruling alliance did not even bother to produce or display their membership receipts or hand over their fee collection publicly.

At any rate, the results of the block elections were a shock to the wrong trend. Out of 58 blocks, the correct trend won in 37 blocks. Seeing the results of these elections, the ruling alliance panicked. The president began sending conciliatory messages to the leaders of the correct trend. The latter responded by making clear that they were perfectly

willing to sacrifice top offices of the union: he could keep the presidency and five other leaders of the ruling alliance could continue to occupy office-bearers' posts in the state committee. In place of six posts with the wrong trend, the correct trend demanded only three – representing Bathinda, Moga and Sangrur. The second condition they placed was the immediate announcement of the dates of the district elections.

#### **Dividing line crossed**

At first the state president appeared to consider the offer, and at the March 25 rally in Chandigarh announced that the district elections dates would be fixed on April 1. On April 1, however, he did an about-face and aggressively rejected the demand for elections within a short specified period. "First the performance report has to be prepared and sent to the district committees. Then after May we will consider the question." Moreover, he announced an agenda of issuing warnings to the main activists of the correct trend, inquiring into "election violations" by them, and so on. He announced that no date would be announced for the election in Bathinda until after the completion of an inquiry into allegations against the district committee.

This was a dividing line. Till now, it had appeared still possible to prevent a split. Now the ruling alliance had decided on a split. It became the duty of the correct trend to prepare the union ranks for the oncoming split.

Meanwhile the conditions necessary to successfully unite the ranks behind the correct trend in case of a split had been fulfilled in the intervening period. (i) The ruling alliance did not play any useful role in relation to the peasant struggles, but acted as an obstacle to them. (ii) There was now more than sufficient material to convince any activist at any level of the stand of the correct trend on organisational questions. For example, the violations of the organisational norms carried out in Mansa district provided ample material to the proponents of the correct trend to show how the banner of BKU was being misused. Peasants' resentment against these violations turned out to exceed expectations. (iii) Important leaders in the union who were earlier neutral were now convinced that the correct-trend leaders were the real pro-unity force, and they became allies of the correct trend.

On the other hand, several factors indicated that there was now no scope to go along with the ruling alliance. First, on the question of peasant indebtedness, there was now no force left in the state committee which had either the strength or the will for a serious struggle. Secondly, there was now no appeal against any of the arbitrary decisions of the ruling alliance. Thirdly, on the question of violation of the union's norms regarding parliamentary elections, the written complaints of the forces of the correct trend were ignored. Fourthly, the ruling alliance was now determined not to carry out the delegate conference. Instead, a vilification campaign had been launched.

Finally, it was now clear that if, after a split, the forces of the correct trend spent time and energy, they could make up any losses incurred. Whereas if the uncertainty were to continue, it would be impossible for them to attend to the pending struggles. If the union's development as a struggle-oriented organisation were blocked, it would get converted into a propaganda-oriented organisation. This would negatively influence even the cadres of the correct trend. Demoralisation would set in.

For the forces of the correct trend, it now became compulsory to take urgent steps for the re-organisation of the union. With the state committee launching an open assault on the Bathinda committee, activists right up to the village demanded of the leaders of the correct trend that they act. In fact, from Mansa, Sangrur, and Ferozepur activists were questioning the delay in acting. They in fact were anxious that the leadership of the correct trend should not compromise with the wrong trend.

### How to set about the re-organisation?

The leaders of the correct trend began the preparations. A clear-cut discussion with the allies of the correct trend was required, laying out the position. False propaganda of the wrong trend, such as that the forces of the correct trend planned to make BKU (Ekta) into a wing of the Lok Morcha Punjab (a revolutionary democratic front), had to be refuted. And it was necessary to explain the plans clearly to the activists.

What form should the struggle take: the carrying out of district conferences? The setting up of a parallel centre? Or should the correct trend simply wait for further actions by the ruling alliance?

Instead of the above, a new form was chosen by the leaders of the

correct trend, for which there was no specific provision in the constitution of the BKU, namely, a "Kisan Council". The proposed Council was to consist of the president and secretary of each village unit, the whole committee of each block, the whole committee of each district, and the whole of the state committee. In the absence of the state conference, such a body would command greater authority than the state committee. Such a body would also reflect the real majority of the organisation, as opposed to the manufactured majority in the state committee.

There was just a month in which to carry out the preparations for such a meeting, and that was the month of April, in which the harvesting of wheat is carried out. First a discussion was held among the main leaders of the correct trend and its leading allies – in all, about 15 persons. This discussion succeeded in clearing many apprehensions among the allies. The proposal came from the district president of Mansa – the same district which was the base of the senior vice-president, who had now joined the ruling alliance in the union – that, in preparation for the Kisan Council, all the leading activists from throughout the state associated with the correct trend should be gathered at one meeting, convinced, and carried. This proposal, already in the minds of the organisers, was accepted.

It was decided that the planned gathering should bring out the real differences between the two sides: on overall orientation (whether to restrict the union to just propaganda, or take it to the level of struggle as well); on the union's role vis-à-vis parliamentary elections; and on the need to struggle on the question of peasant indebtedness. The organisational manipulation should be thoroughly exposed and false propaganda refuted. The efforts and sacrifices made by the correct trend in the hope of saving the organisation's unity should be revealed. The senior vice-president from Mansa should be concretely exposed, not only for his recent stands but his compromising role in earlier struggles as well.

At the same time, it was necessary to positively project the potential new leading team, its capability and numbers, in order to build confidence in the new leadership. Regarding the all-important debt issue, it was necessary to project what sort of leadership was required to carry out a serious struggle on this issue, and how the leadership of the correct

trend had proved itself in struggle to be capable of doing so.

Finally, while still expressing the desire to do whatever was required to save the union's unity, the leaders of the correct trend would have to make clear there was now no real scope to prevent a split.

### **Himmatpura meeting – turning point in the struggle**

The planned meeting, which was kept secret from the leaders of the wrong trend, took place on April 28 at Himmatpura. About 250 leading activists from 10 districts attended. Of them, 16 were state committee members (by virtue of being district committee presidents/secretaries). Seventeen of them were full time leading activists of the union, of whom nine were at the state level. Forty of them were activists who, at the time of any important struggle, left their other activities and worked full time for the union.

The meeting's success exceeded all expectations. The first session thoroughly exposed the deeds, propaganda and role of the ruling alliance in the union. In the next session, one activist, a teacher by profession, described the role and record of the leadership of the correct trend. He concluded his description by saying that, inspired by the current situation, he was now taking premature retirement from his job in order to be able to work full-time for the union.

In the session that followed, in which anyone could speak from the floor, 90 persons spoke – such was the enthusiasm and sense of participation. No less than 70 persons formally declared their commitment to work full-time for the union. Said one, "We can work only 24 hours a day for the union, since there are not 26 hours in a day". When one was making such a commitment, another said, "Be sure of the seriousness of your commitment. We are sitting in the gurdwara." The first answered, "It is precisely in that spirit I am making my commitment." Indeed, it became clear that for the peasants activists, making such a commitment was not a light matter. It had to be discussed beforehand with the family, arrangements made, and only then could it be spoken at the meeting. Thus a few said they could not commit to work full-time till they had cleared the matter at home. Others said with full seriousness: "I have told the family; it is our common decision." A leader from Sangrur, who was later to become the president of the new body, said, "I have given

my land on rent. To pay my debt to my relatives, I have mortgaged some land. My debt to the commission agent is wiped out (ie, in the union's understanding, the peasant debt to the usurers has already been paid several times over). My daughters (he has only daughters) have told me, 'Do what you need to do'. I have handed all property matters over to my family." Another said, referring to a recent bomb blast in which some people had died, "Now my family members should consider me to have died in that bomb blast." One activist firmly said, "I have rented out my land and sold my animals. If you decide to hang on with the present leadership of the union, I will have to consider what to do. But if you decide to part ways with them, then I will give myself full-time for the union."

Of the 70 who made such commitments, about 35 were of the activist level, capable of organising their own tasks. The remaining were of the type who would be able for carrying out any tasks they were assigned.

The atmosphere was electric. Hearing the expressions of commitment and enthusiasm, listeners' hairs stood on end. The participants demanded of the leadership that it show its seriousness in action. The meeting gave the following course of action: "First make clear in the state committee meeting of May 1 that all the agendas of action against our people (ie those representing the correct trend) must be dropped. Secondly, the state leadership must immediately announce dates for the district elections to be completed within a short time. The state conference must be held within the month of May. At present, the state committee has only a supervisory role, pending the completion of the conference. Till then, no action is to be taken against any person; any such action will be discussed in the state conference itself."

If the state committee were not to agree to these measures, the meeting said, the state committee should be asked to call the Kisan Council (to be constituted as described above). The decisions of the Council will be agreed to by us. But if the state committee still refuses to call such a Council, we will do so. Tell the state committee that; and tell them also of this meeting itself. No doubt this meeting is not an ordinary one; but the situation is abnormal, and demands extraordinary steps."

### Role of the objective factor

In such a fashion the Himmatpura meeting showed its confidence and clarity about the course it had adopted. It exceeded all the expectations of the organisers. This was the turning point in the entire inner-organisational struggle. It brought out that the organisers of the correct trend had correctly taken the pulse of the peasant ranks. In the previous few years, especially from the time of the Jethuke struggle, poor peasants had come to the fore in the union. These peasant ranks, through the practical school of struggle, had arrived at the stage when they could grasp the differences between the two sides in the union. And the differences were of such a nature that the ranks could not be lax or lenient regarding them. They were burning questions, questions of life and death for the peasants. If they were to submit to the ruling alliance in the union, then there would be no point in continuing in the union, since their issues would be sidelined; and in that case, for many of them, it would be difficult even to carry on their existence, since they faced the loss of their land.

In this fashion the objective situation too played its role in the developments in the BKU (Ekta). As the imperialist onslaught has proceeded, the condition of the peasantry, particularly the poor peasantry, has deteriorated dramatically. The prices of items of consumption have risen much more sharply than those of their produce. Other avenues of employment have dried up. Prices of inputs such as diesel and fertiliser have risen steeply; yields have stagnated; and procurement is being wound up, leaving them helpless before the traders. Bank credit is even scarcer than before, particularly for poor peasants. In such conditions, they are driven to even greater dependence on the usurers, who not only extract high rates of interest, but force the peasants to buy inputs from them and sell produce to them at depressed prices. All this has driven the peasants to the point where they are in danger of losing their land. This is a dividing line for the peasants: They see no point in continuing their existence after losing their land. This explains the phenomenon of hundreds of suicides of debt-ridden peasants over the past four years in the state. This also explains the powerful wave of peasant participation in the real struggle-activities and struggle-centres of the BKU (Ekta).

These objective conditions, then, left the peasant ranks of the BKU

(Ekta) no margin to submit to the dictates of the wrong trend.

At the same time, recent experience had shown the implications of taking up the issues being raised by the correct trend, most prominently the debt issue. The ruling classes and their State machinery took any struggle on this issue very seriously, as they do with any struggle touching, even indirectly, the question of the means of production. Moreover, they perceived in such struggles the potential to unleash peasant participation and self-organisation. Thus even the district administration's anticipation that the BKU (Ekta) leadership would take up the issue of usury motivated them to carry out aggressive repression on the bus-fare agitation at Jethuke. Similarly, the following series of struggles against commission agents culminating in the Sandoha struggle were met by the fierce repression at Maiserkhana. So, let alone launching struggles on the debt question, if the BKU (Ekta) state leadership were to cooperate with, or even tolerate, the correct trend carrying out militant struggles, it too would face the fire of State repression. It would have to change its entire method of work and be prepared for serious sacrifices. Whereas if it were to restrict itself to propagating and demonstrating against imperialism (as opposed to *struggling* as well against imperialism), the WTO, remunerative prices and so on, it would face no more problems than any ruling class party.

Thus the objective conditions did not leave the leaders of the wrong trend any scope to tolerate the struggle-activities of the correct trend. They had to be shut down.

This in turn meant that for the leaders of the correct trend, confrontation with the wrong trend was inevitable. Failure to do so would be to demoralise the fighting peasant ranks and cause the retreat of poor peasants from the union.

The scope to continue in the same organisation had evaporated. The objective situation, the condition of the peasantry, left no margin for concession by either side – either the wrong side would have to be remoulded according to the correct trend, or vice-versa.

### Towards the Kisan Council

At the May 1 state committee meeting, the leaders and allies of the correct trend placed the facts squarely before the body. The Sangrur

district president told the state president: "You have split the organisation. Now we are to decide whether it is to be concluded amicably or not." In the meeting, the Sangrur president said, "Yes, we have had a meeting of our supporters. What of it? You meet (chief minister) Badal and the police secretly. Now tell us: are you announcing the dates of the district conferences?" The state president refused to do so, repeating the same excuses: "First we have to examine the district lists. The performance report has to go to the districts. By July we will complete the elections. Regarding Bathinda we will not set a date till the inquiry into their irregularities is over."

At this point the representatives of the correct trend placed the condition of calling a Kisan Council; the state leadership refused; and so the former declared that they would go ahead and call it. The state leadership in turn cancelled the membership of Sukhdev Kokri, whom they had already removed from state vice-presidentship. (The excuse given was that he had attended the Ferozepur district committee meeting where the state leadership had come to explain the reasons for his being removed from his post.) Six other leaders of the correct trend were warned via a press statement.

In all 1950 peasant activists were invited for the Kisan Council – including two each from 720 village units, seven each from the union's 58 block committees, seven each from the union's 12 districts, and nine office-bearers of the state committee. In preparation for the Council, district committee meetings were held in all the districts where the correct trend had access. These were attended by not only committee members but other peasant activists as well – numbering 40, 50, even 100. In these meetings the contents of the Himmatpura meeting were reported. The false propaganda of the state leadership was effectively countered. In response to the claim that the correct trend would not provide membership lists, they declared that they were prepared to do so. In response to the claim that they were running away from the rally of the Forum Against Imperialist Globalisation to be held in Delhi on May 10, they countered that they would certainly attend the rally (in fact they were the largest contingent from Punjab)

Following the district meetings, from all areas there came resounding approval for the Kisan Council programme. The feeling of the peasants

was that now the decision regarding the future of the union would be in their own hands. Meanwhile, the state leadership suffered a fiasco when it tried to hold a meeting in Rampura to convince peasants not to attend the Kisan Council.

The state leadership called a last special state committee meeting on May 18. The leaders of the correct trend placed written demands before the state leadership. First, Sukhdev Kokri had to be re-instated as a delegate to the conference. Secondly, no action was to be taken against any member till the conference. Thirdly, district elections and the state conference had to take place within a specified short period (ie within a month or so). The state leadership should give an undertaking in the Kisan Council itself to undertake the above steps; in which case the leaders of the correct trend would take no further steps.

In response, the state leadership refused to announce dates for the Bathinda district election, which would be held only after an "inquiry" on June 12. Regarding Sukhdev Kokri, "that would be considered in the next state committee meeting". "Then the Kisan Council will take place".

### Kisan Council takes place

On May 21 the Kisan Council took place at Talwandi Sabo. Formally opening the meet, 16 state committee members, along with the presidents and secretaries of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Muktsar (units formed since the last conference), asked the participants for their approval to call such a meet. They received resounding approval. A new state committee was not elected at the gathering; instead a state election supervisory committee was formed. This committee then conducted the Council.

Sukhdev Kokri was asked to present his case to the Council. He did so not as an individual, but as a representative of the fighting line. He brought out the achievements of the fighting line, the clash between the two lines in the state committee, and finally the attempt by the state leadership to suppress the practice of the correct line. During the course of his one-hour speech, the audience broke into applause six or seven times, and twice an ordinary peasant from Malserkhana rose to his feet to say, "Yes, what he says is correct, that is exactly how it happened." At the end of this session, the Council decided to restore his member-

ship.

The Council instructed the state committee that its rights were now restricted. By June 10 the state conference had to be completed.

The mood in the Kisan Council was one of jubilation, not only among the leadership but among the ranks. Of the 1,950 qualified to participate in the Council, 1350 actually attended. A large number of observers also attended, bring the total to 2,500. Out of 58 blocks in which the union existed, peasant activists came from 36 blocks in which the correct trend was in the majority, as well as 10 blocks which were mixed. The whole of Ludhiana, Moga, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Ferozepur and Muktsar units; 85 per cent of Bathinda; 70 per cent of Sangrur; half of Faridkot; and, in an important development, a majority of Mansa too, took part. (In Mansa, the correct trend found when it approached the union members at the block and village level that there was widespread resentment at Ruldu Singh's misuse of the union for the purposes of his parliamentary party. These peasants responded to the correct trend beyond expectations, and it soon emerged that Ruldu Singh was in the minority. This was a major blow to the wrong trend, since Mansa was the only area in which it enjoyed any mass base.) Only from Patiala and Fatehgarh Sahib did no one attend.

From the Kisan Council followed a hectic series of district conferences, at the rate of almost one a day. The state conference itself took place on June 8 at Jethuke, the village of the martyrs of the peasant struggle. Here the real issues between the two trends were presented once again, in a written form. This writing showed how the leaders of the wrong trend were not prepared for a struggle on the burning issues of the peasants; in particular they had deserted the struggle against usury. Even further, they could not tolerate the correct trend putting up a militant fight on this issue. They were blocking and sabotaging every attempt by the correct trend to carry forward this struggle. Organisationally, they realised that if the election process were carried through properly, and in particular if the elections were held in the main struggle-centre of Bathinda, the correct trend would be in an overwhelming majority. Hence they refused to conduct the elections.

Finally, the conference elected a new state committee. Joginder Singh

Ugrahan, erstwhile president of Sangrur district, was elected state president. Sukhdev Kokri was elected state general secretary. The new state committee gave a call for statewide demonstrations at district headquarters on June 14 on various peasant demands, including the demands of the Sandoha struggle, and support to the struggle of peasants of Haryana against the state government's attempt to collect electricity arrears. A massive rally, with statewide mobilisation, is planned at Mansa on July 22.

**Tailpiece:** The "inquiry" into "irregularities of Bathinda district", pending which Pishoura Singh, the then state president of the BKU, had refused to hold elections in the district, finally took place on June 12 after the polarisation and re-organisation had already taken place. Pishoura Singh assembled about 40 of his followers at Talwandi Sabo, little expecting the Bathinda district president, Jhanda Singh Jethuke, to turn up with about 100 peasant activists of the district, insist on hearing the charges against him, and systematically refute them one by one. (One example will suffice: A block-level leader had charged Jhanda Singh with having failed to inform him of the election date and of having carried out the election behind his back. It was proved that not only had he been informed, but he had remained absent because he was attending the celebrations of a successful candidate in the Vidhan Sabha elections. Unfortunately for him, a photo of him at the celebrations had appeared in the newspapers, which was produced on the occasion.)

After Jhanda Singh spoke, there was pin-drop silence. All Pishoura Singh could say was, "See, that was all there was to it. For this what was the need for a split?"

### Conclusions

The experience of the struggle within the BKU (Ekta) has been positive beyond the highest expectations of the organisers of the correct trend. Not only does a victorious mood prevail regarding the attempts to sabotage the unity of the organisation, but the ranks and leadership are eagerly looking forward to sharper class battles on the basic peasant demands. The leadership of the correct trend was not only able to prevent substantial damage to the organisation, but was able to raise the

consciousness, level of organisation, fighting spirit, and fighting capacity of the peasant organisation, and thus prepare it for a major step forward in the practical movement. Let us return to the question posed at the start of this report: What explains the extent of positive results yielded by this struggle?

First, the organisers of the correct trend were successful in *linking the political struggle* (between the two lines for developing the union) *with the concrete class struggle*. The basic masses in general, and peasants in particular, do not go by the spoken or written word much; they accept a truth only if it corresponds to their direct experience. Pending its confirmation in practice, they reserve their judgment about it.

The militant mass struggle-alternative was not something that the leaders of the correct trend merely referred to in their speeches; it took a concrete shape in various small and big agitations and confrontations. It was particularly associated with the glorious Jethuke struggle, the paddy procurement struggle, and the Maiserkhana struggle. Peasants had directly witnessed the leaders of the correct trend initiating and taking forward such important militant mass struggles waged by the BKU (Ekta). Thus peasants could easily grasp the alternative being posed by the leaders of the correct trend.

In particular, the organisers of the correct trend were able to take the pulse of the peasant masses regarding the burning problem of peasant indebtedness. Due to their correct analysis of the objective situation, the organisers of the correct trend were able to tap the powerful peasant urge for a do-or-die fight on this issue. The ranks of the union were able to perceive from actual struggle-experience that the correct trend was for such a fight on the issue of usury, whereas the wrong trend was deserting the battlefield. The actual performance of the state leadership after it usurped the leadership of the Maiserkhana struggle left no doubt in their minds on this issue. When the proponents of the wrong trend argued that the leaders of the Maiserkhana struggle had brought repression unnecessarily on the peasants for a trivial issue, their stand backfired on them. Given the nature of the issue, the peasants were prepared for such sacrifices. In terms of their practical class struggle, then, they were able to differentiate between the positions of the two trends.

Another example of how the ranks grasped a political issue in the

course of class struggle was on the question of keeping the union free from ties to political parties. During the Jethuke struggle, the top state-level office-bearers foisted, on the actual forces in struggle, an Action Committee which included various parliamentary political parties and political platforms/groups. This Action Committee attempted to usurp the right to conduct the struggle itself. Through this experience the ranks could see how failure to maintain the mass organisation's independence winds up robbing the democratic right of the members of the mass organisation.

The same principle that applies to political questions holds for organisational issues. That is, the ranks are able to grasp organisational issues, and participate in them, when they are able to relate them to their direct class struggle issues. Until such time as they are able to do so, organisational issues should no doubt be fought out, but they should not be taken beyond a limit. The correct trend may have to be prepared for some losses as a result of organisational wrongs done to it until that time.

For example, while the representatives of the wrong trend manufactured votes and carried out various other wholesale irregularities for the 1999 conference of the union, there was no point in pressing the issue beyond a point, especially as the organisation itself was in a state of stagnation, with no serious struggles afoot. Whereas later, when the ranks were able to perceive the motives of the ruling alliance in victimising Sukhdev Kokri, and relate it to the actual struggles in which he had been prominent, they could effectively intervene and set right the organisational misdeed.

Secondly, the organisers were effective in *ensuring the maximum democratic participation of the ranks in the inner-organisational struggle*. This is linked to the first point. Because the issues were posed in terms of the practical (and ongoing) class struggle, the peasant ranks were able to grasp them. And because they were able to grasp the issues, they were able to participate in the struggle. Further, the organisers were able to devise such forms and forums as would tap their democratic potential.

Thirdly, while the correct trend maintained organisational discipline in its true spirit, it did not do so blindly and mechanically. The touchstone was the needs of the struggle, in such terms as could be followed by the



majority of the ranks. Several examples can be cited. During the Maiserkhana struggle, the state leadership, alarmed by the advance of the correct trend, directed that one district committee and its ranks could not come in support of another during a struggle. If any such support was required, it would have to be got through the state committee. This patently motivated move was so clearly opposed to the interests of the peasant struggle that it could be defied without much worry, since the ranks of the organisation could easily grasp the issues at stake. Similarly, there is no provision in the BKU (Ekta) constitution for a Kisan Council. But when peasants were able to see the need for some body with the authority to dictate to the state committee, they embraced the idea, and the organisational objections of the state committee became irrelevant (in fact, they had to confine their objections to saying that only they were empowered to call the Kisan Council).

No doubt, an important factor in the success of the struggle was the capability of the team leading the struggle. If the correct trend is to effectively fight the wrong trend, it must be able to develop new forms and means for continuing the struggle, on the basis of the new developments in the wrong trend. One such sign of development was the fact that the correct trend was able to keep its allies with it, and win new allies. These allies provided a touchstone of common peasant sentiment, outside the circle of those directly under the influence of the correct trend. The clear-cut attitude of the allies signalled the organisers of the correct trend that the situation was ripe for the course undertaken.

If the correct trend does not creatively apply the line, its effectiveness, however proper its positions might be, will be limited. In the course of struggling against the wrong trend, the correct trend itself must develop. It must not face developments spontaneously, but plan and prepare the ranks for them. At every twist and turn of the struggle, the organisers of the correct trend assessed the situation and prepared the teams of activists for the coming developments, and for confronting the wrong trend. Each such confrontation for which the ranks and activists had been prepared, and in which they were therefore able to acquit themselves well, gave them increased confidence in the correct trend and in their own capacity.

Finally, within the correct trend itself, there are several shades of

opinion. It is necessary for the organisers of the correct trend to study them, and carry out persuasion and struggle in a positive way among these trends to effectively and unitedly fight the wrong trends.

-- June 20, 2002.