

Pointers from the Twelfth Lok Sabha Elections

— aspects to be noted by revolutionary forces

As was expected, the outcome of the elections to the 12th Lok Sabha and the poll performance of the various ruling class parties, including the revisionist parties, has disappointed the Indian ruling classes and their imperialist masters. The election drama staged with much fanfare has once again resulted in a hung parliament and an unstable government.

The Indian ruling classes tried their level best to somehow prevent the dissolution of the 11th Lok Sabha. They tried to form a stable government by manipulating a majority from amongst the three main alliances — the Congress and co., BJP and co., and the United Front — so that the Lok Sabha could complete its full term.

After the dissolution of the Lok Sabha, the Indian ruling classes were eagerly hoping for a stable government of a single party, be it the Congress or the BJP. If that were not possible, then they preferred a stable coalition government in which the main constituent party would be dominant enough to play a pivotal role in the coalition and would be only marginally dependent upon the supporting parties for mustering a majority in the parliament. Such a coalition could be forged only around the Congress or the BJP.

A major section of the Indian ruling classes, no doubt, preferred the time-tested, loyal, and experienced Congress party to be at the helm; but the extent to which the Congress had suffered a decline as an all-India party, disabled it in coming up to the expectations of the ruling classes and meeting the challenge; the ruling classes are facing today. From the very onset of the poll process to the 12th Lok Sabha, the Indian ruling classes pinned their hopes upon the BJP. The big bourgeois-controlled ruling class media began to build up A.B. Vajpayee

as a great national leader. Sensing the will of the ruling classes, the process of defections from other parties, especially from the Congress to the BJP, began to gather momentum. But the advent of Sonia Gandhi into the poll-fray kindled hopes of rejuvenating the Congress party in the minds of a section of the ruling classes. Now, the ruling class media took to playing up Sonia Gandhi as an astute and charismatic leader.

There is a basic contradiction between the autocratic character of the Indian State and its donned garb of parliamentary democracy. That is why it has always been a major concern of the Indian ruling classes to ensure the credibility of, and the people's continued faith in, this so-called parliamentary democracy. In order to be able to solve this problem, the Indian ruling classes have always needed to cultivate in the minds of the people the image of this or that bourgeois politician as a charismatic and great national leader so that a government led by him is accepted as a popular government. In view of the very limited ground available for building up the image of either Vajpayee or Sonia Gandhi as "great national leaders", the way the big bourgeois media has projected them utterly out of proportion to that during the recent elections points to the extent of the crisis in which the present Indian parliamentary democracy has landed itself.

It is a manifestation of the aggravated crisis that the Congress pinned all its hopes on the "Sonia factor" for faring better in the elections. Sonia Gandhi seemed to bourgeois editors and commentators as well as to the Congress party a mythological Kapila cow which could sail them through the ocean of internal disintegration and lack of mass credibility. It was perhaps this very need of inventing some "great national leader" that persuaded the BJP to enter the poll campaign by projecting Vajpayee as its candidate for the prime ministerial post. A similar trend is catching up at the state levels. During the assembly elections in Punjab, the Shiromani Akali Dal projected P.S. Badal as a "popular leader of the Punjabi masses" and pre-ordained him the future chief minister of Punjab. Similarly, in a press statement issued by the chief minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, just prior to the unfolding of the election process, he revealed that if the post-poll situation demanded of him that he shoulder the responsibility of prime ministership, he would not shirk it.

The crisis of dearth of election issues

The crisis through which Indian parliamentary politics is passing is now expressing itself in the utter lack of election issues for the ruling class parliamentary parties. That is why these parties are accusing one another of a queer and novel type of theft — the “theft of election issues”. The problem is this: on the one hand, these parties have to avoid, during the election campaign, the basic as well as other burning issues of the people, on the other hand, they have to raise some vague issues to lure the voters to their side. At the same time, they need to raise certain issues which help them win the confidence of the major section of the ruling classes by assuring them of their party's ability to serve them.

The slogan of providing a stable government served as a major poll-plank for almost all the ruling class parties. But it was the BJP that drummed it the most. The Congress party accused the BJP of stealing its slogan of a stable government.

Without any worthwhile pro-people policies and programme, the slogan of a “stable government” is shorn of all political content and irrelevant to the people. Rather, for the people, a situation of instability can prove advantageous to some extent. Barring those areas of the country where a situation essentially akin to martial law already prevails to crush the people's struggles, the instability and debility of the state and central governments comes in the way of these governments unleashing unbridled police repression to crush the people's struggles.

On implementing the “new economic policy”, and on taking all necessary administrative and legal steps required to implement it, a general consensus prevails among all the ruling class as well as revisionist parties. The new economic policy will lead to intensified plunder of the Indian people at the hands of Indian ruling classes and their imperialist masters. So, to implement the above policy the ruling classes are in dire need of a strong and stable government. The ruling class parties are therefore vying with one another to win the confidence of the ruling classes as to which one is the most competent among them to provide a stable government. The slogan of a stable government was thus, in the main, addressed to the ruling classes. It was addressed,

to a lesser extent, to the urban middle class which is often wary of dislocations in their lives caused by political instability and is also prone to the illusion that it can utilise the opportunities provided by the stability to hike its social status.

The results of the 12th Lok Sabha poll have taken the wind out of the high-profile claims of these parties that they can provide a stable government. A representative of the ruling classes and a spokesman of the Hinduja industrial house, expressing his utter dismay at the poll results, lamented: “We are, once again, back to square one at the end of these elections.” But even these words of disappointment do not fully reveal the true state of affairs. The fact is, the crisis of parliamentary democracy — in particular of providing a stable government — not only persists but has deepened further.

The crisis has deepened further

The political credibility of all the three major poll alliances of the ruling class and revisionist parties has nosedived — from the earlier, 11th, Lok Sabha elections right through to the formation of the Vajpayee government. In fact, the ruling class institutions, in general, have suffered further erosion of their credibility. And the present Vajpayee government is even more unstable than the preceding two governments of the UF.

The sack of the Deve Gowda government engineered by the Congress, followed by the fall of the subsequent Gujral ministry, the consequent dissolution of the Lok Sabha paving the way for the installation of the present Vajpayee government, the wholesale desertions from the Congress to the BJP, and the poll alliances in different states forged by the various factions of the Congress after deserting that party — all these happenings have exposed the tall claims of the Congress party that it is capable of putting an end to political instability or that it is a secular force which can oppose the communalism of the BJP.

The happenings of the last one and a half years have also ruthlessly exposed the ideological and moralistic mask the BJP has put on to camouflage its lust for power — in a way that had never happened since its coming into being, including in its earlier incarnation as the Bharatiya Jan Sangh. Its wholesale buying at any price of the assembly members belonging to opposition parties in order to form the government in U.P.;

its welcoming with open arms the notorious turn-coats from other parties to muster a majority in the 12th Lok Sabha and its entering into alliances on capitulationist terms to form its ministry at the Centre; etc, have baffled even the bourgeois political commentators. In terms of ascendancy to political power, the BJP has soared to the zenith of its political life; but in terms of political credibility, it has sunk to a new abyss.

These elections have exposed, even more acutely, the hollowness of the Congress and the BJP as all-India political formations. The essential distinguishing feature of an all-India party consists in its numerical dominance in the parliament over the regional parties. If it has to forge electoral pacts with the regional parties, then it generally claims a majority share of the parliamentary seats for itself even if it has to forsake a majority of the assembly seats to the regional outfit. An all- India party hardly enters into a poll pact as a junior ally with a regional party during the parliamentary elections. But during these parliamentary elections, both the Congress as well as the BJP have entered or tried to enter into poll pacts with the regional parties as junior allies in many a state. The inordinate share of the smaller regional parties in the Lok Sabha as well as in the Vajpayee government thus underlines the decline of the all-India parties rather than the strengthening of the regional parties.

These elections have also further corroded the credibility of the regional parties hooked to the United Front by exposing their utter opportunism. During the days of the 11th Lok Sabha, a number of regional parties utilised "federalism" and "secularism" as an ideological prop to grab the Central government in alliance with the Janata Dal and the Left Front. These parties of the United Front indeed characterised the Congress and the BJP as enemies of the people and posed the UF, based on policies of federalism and secularism, as the third alternative before the people. Their attitude towards the Congress or the BJP was neither a product of their commitment to any kind of federalism nor of any attachment to some secularism. Their sole aim was to usurp Central governmental power while keeping intact their governments in the states. Some of these parties had to adopt a soft stance towards the BJP and an oppositional attitude towards the

Congress to attain power at the state level or to maintain it. But at the Central level, they had to oppose the BJP and seek the support of the Congress to form a government at the Centre. So long as the UF government at the Centre remained intact, the state-level contradictions remained suppressed. After the elections to the 12th Lok Sabha, however, these contradictions came to the fore becoming more and more decisive. They took the wind out of the sails of the UF itself and robbed it of its ideological planks of "federalism" and "secularism".

To gain power or to remain in power at the state-level, wherever the main fight of a regional party was with the BJP, and the Congress was weak in that state, the concerned regional party adopted a co-operative posture towards the Congress and a confrontationist posture towards the BJP in the name of opposing communalism. The secularism of Laloo Yadav in Bihar and Mulayam Singh Yadav in U.P. falls under this category. In states where the BJP is weak and the regional party is mainly pitted against the Congress, there, the concerned regional party adopted a hardline approach towards the Congress and a cooperative attitude towards the BJP. This is the main reason behind the vanished secularism of the Telugu Desam and the Asom Gana Parishad and their political hobnobbing with the BJP. The changed stance of the National Conference in J & K, too, falls in this category, though with some variations.

Many more instances can be cited which corroborate the decisive role being played by state-level contradictions in the forming of political alliances with the BJP or with the Congress. Ramakrishna Hegde had for long nurtured his image as a staunch anti-communalist. Now, in the face of his ongoing tussle with Deve Gowda in Karnataka, he has forsaken his secularism, and entered into a political alliance with the BJP. A still more interesting instance is from Haryana. The Lok Dal (R) led by Om Parkash Chautala fought the elections against the BJP-HVP combine. The communalism of the BJP was severely taken to task during the election campaign. Immediately after winning four parliamentary seats in Haryana, in an apparent bid to usurp governmental power in the state from his rival Haryana Vikas party of Bansi Lal, Chautala unabashedly declared support to the BJP combine government at the Centre. In Tamil Nadu, the prime consideration for the AIADMK in deciding about its political alliance with one or the other party consisted in how best it can

tackle its main rival in the state's politics. This very consideration which earlier prompted the AIADMK to oppose the BJP and cooperate with the Congress, is now prompting it to oppose the Congress and ally with the BJP.

The Janata Dal, the biggest constituent of the United Front, has got the severest drubbing in this election. The tally of its seats in the parliament has shrunk from 46 in the 11th Lok Sabha to a miserable six in the 12th Lok Sabha. The continual ongoing tussles among its various factions (between Laloo Yadav and Sharad Yadav; between Laloo Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan factions; between Laloo Yadav and Deve Gowda factions; between Deve Gowda and Ramakrishna Hegde factions in Karnataka; etc.) have led to the disintegration of the Janata Dal as an all-India party and have badly shattered its claims of emerging as the third alternative besides the BJP and the Congress.

The seeds of disintegration of the Janata Dal can be traced to its caste-based ideological plank of "social justice". If this ideological plank envisaged the division of political power and other benefits on caste lines, then, mutual bickerings and conflicts among the people of innumerable so-called lower castes and tribes and the leaders having a social-political foothold among them are imminent. The other backward castes (O.B.C.s), such as Yadavs, include many sections of the landlords among their social ranks. The intensifying class conflicts among these landlords and the peasant masses belonging to the O.B.C.s are expressing themselves in the form of caste contradictions and caste conflicts. Some factions of the JD do not hesitate to align with the leaders of the upper castes in a bid to outmanoeuvre their rivals in the ongoing factional fight. This has paved the way for the collapse of the casteist ideological plank of social justice. A national leadership which is politically competent and authoritative enough to keep unified the various disgruntled and divergent political factions based on landlord and other socio-class interests is a must for an all-India political party. Lack of such a leadership and programme at the national level, which could safeguard its identity as an all-India party, was the Janata Dal's inherent weakness.

Ruling class political institutions further discredited

During the period since the constitution of the 11th Lok Sabha, ruling class political institutions have been further discredited. The naked partisan role played by the U.P. assembly speaker in favour of the BJP and by the governor against the BJP at the time of the formation of the BJP government through large-scale buying of the legislators, has brought this institution into great disrepute.

The vociferous demand for CBI probes by the opposition parties even in smaller and sundry cases in itself constitutes a confession on the part of the ruling class parties of the sagging credibility of the local investigation agencies. On the other hand, the dismissal of the CBI-launched corruption cases on an unprecedented scale by the courts, the harsh strictures passed by the courts against the CBI, and the virtual take-over of the powers of the CBI director by the court, etc., point to the grim reality that the credibility of the CBI as an impartial and reliable investigation agency has plummeted to a new low.

The demand for deployment of central para-military forces in the states during the elections to maintain law and order has often been raised earlier too. But during these elections, the demand to deploy the central para-military forces at the polling booths has more vociferously been made to check the high-handedness and malpractices of the ruling party. The enhanced demand for the central forces in itself is an acknowledgement of the fact that even the opposition political parties, let alone the ordinary people, do not find their interests secure in the hands of an unduly interfering and increasingly partisan state police and bureaucracy.

The Indian ruling classes have always tried to maintain an honourable image of the speaker of the parliament. Keeping this in mind, they have always endeavoured to vest the office of speakership in a person who is deemed an eminent and impressive figure and is respected even by the opposition political parties. Right from the inception of the parliament in India, the office of speakership has always been with a nominee of the ruling party at the Centre. For the first time, the BJP, in a political deal with the Telugu Desam, offered the speakership to an ordinary M.P. of the TDP, thus "sullying" the dignity of this so-called august office. A number of spokespersons of the opposition parties have ridiculed this

institution by jeering at the speaker during the debate on the motion of confidence moved by the Vajpayee government. Some time back, the BJP formed its government in U.P. by engineering defections on a massive scale.

Even the office of the president of India, the highest institution of "the republic of India", could not be spared from some flak in the dog-fight among the various ruling class and revisionist parties on the issue of whether the U.P. government should be dismissed by the president or not. In the crisis-ridden prevailing situation, when all the political institutions of the ruling classes are getting discredited, the ruling classes are trying their utmost to preserve the myth of the unquestionable and venerable authority of the president of India. The bourgeois media played an exceptional role in building the image of the present president R.K. Narayanan — an almost unanimous choice of the ruling classes. But if even persons like Chandra Shekhar, a most ardent defender of the present system and its political institutions, could not desist from dragging the institution of the president into the dogfight of the ruling class parties by criticising it publicly, then it speaks volumes of the grave political crisis that the ruling classes are in.

The instability of the government

Whether a multi-party alliance can sustain itself or not depends, apart from many other factors, largely upon whether there is some party serving as the main axis of the alliance. None of the parties of the U.F. had such a dominant position in terms of seats in the parliament as enjoyed by the BJP in its present alliance. But the overriding enormity of the negative factors over the positive ones makes the BJP-led alliance more unstable and vulnerable than even the United Front.

Mutual ideological divergences and political dissensions among the alliance partners are far more serious than among the allies in the United Front. In the 17-party alliance led by the BJP, almost all the parties, with the sole exception of the Shiv Sena, have claimed to be firm opponents of the communalist ideology and politics of the BJP and have been expressing sharp differences over the communal issues (such as the annulling of Article 370 concerning Kashmir's autonomy, the Ram Janmabhoomi mandir issue and the uniform civil code issue)

being raised by the BJP.

The previous U.F. government was dependent upon the Congress for its outside support. The situation was such that only the Congress could pull this government down, if and when it desired. But now the key to the continuation or fall of the government lies with so many allies forming the government. Withdrawal of support leading to the fall of government was not as easy a decision for an all-India party like the Congress as it is for smaller allies of the BJP. The refusal of three constituent parties — the Trinamool Congress, TDP and the Haryana Lok Dal (R) — of the BJP-led alliance to join the government indicates that these parties want to keep their hands free to bring down the government as and when they please.

The way in which the process of alliance formation progressed among the BJP and its allies also testifies to the fact that the present BJP-led government is more unstable than the former U.F. government. Political alliance-making exercises among the ruling class parties are often accompanied by a process of political bargaining. But the political bargaining witnessed at the time of the present BJP-led alliance-making was something new. Seldom do smaller allies dictate to the main constituent playing the pivotal role in the alliance — not only as to which ministries should be entrusted to them but also as to who should be inducted as ministers. Throughout the political bargaining, Jayalalitha made the BJP dance to her tune, publicly snubbed it, not only occupied the ministries of her choice but also insisted upon and even ensured that her arch-rival Ramakrishna Hegde did not get some prime and prestigious ministry commensurate with his political stature, etc. Such things have never happened earlier. The political debility as well as the capitulation of the BJP is so starkly evident that even the one-member outfit of Buta Singh succeeded in seizing a cabinet-rank ministerial berth. According to columnist Kuldeep Nayyar, Buta Singh also succeeded in getting the words "the law will be allowed to take its course in all corruption cases which are under consideration" deleted from the "National Agenda" of the coalition.

On the one hand, the allies of the BJP have taken full advantage of the BJP's lust for forming its government at the Centre. On the other hand, it seems that the BJP is pursuing a tactical policy of seizing

governmental power, at any cost, at the Centre and utilising it to strengthen its position in parliament by engineering defections from the other parties. As a result, it can be in a position to lessen its dependence upon its allies and tackle them with firm hands. The BJP wants to repeat the experience of U.P. at the Centre. The various constituents of the BJP-led alliance have not even a semblance of ideological and political basis to unite with one another. The only basis for each constituent seems to be the consideration of how to appropriate the maximum share of the spoils of governmental power.

The people's conduct during the elections

The phenomenon of negative voting, i.e., voting some opposition party to victory in order to penalise the ruling party for its recent repressive and exploitative acts has prevailed during these elections even more acutely than in any earlier election. The ignominious rout of the ruling parties in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and the major gains for the Congress in Rajasthan and Maharashtra, for AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and for the BJP-led alliance in Karnataka are glaring examples of this phenomenon.

If the ruling Akali-BJP alliance in Punjab could come out of these elections unscathed, it was because of its relatively shorter stint of government. If the ruling Left Front in West Bengal was spared from some serious setback, it was only because neither the Congress nor any other party in West Bengal was in a position to cash in on the resentment of the people towards the Left Front government. Even then, the disappointing performance of the CPI(M) in the industrial belt surrounding Howrah and in Calcutta, the victory of a BJP nominee from the Dum Dum parliamentary seat — an erstwhile stronghold of the Left Front and represented by four ministers in the state cabinet, and the disproportionate gains of Mamta Banerji's party, outstripping its actual capacity, are all indicators of this emerging phenomenon.

The state governments (such as Orissa, Rajasthan, etc) which were overzealous in implementing the new economic policy by enhancing the rates of electricity or water, hiking bus fares or abolishing subsidies, and the state governments which let loose unbridled police repression (such as Haryana and Madhya Pradesh) to crush the people's resistance

to these measures, were made to pay a major political price during these elections. Having suffered a severe thrashing at the hands of the people during these parliamentary elections in Rajasthan, the ruling BJP is actively considering the withdrawal for the time being of hikes in electricity and water charges as well as in bus fares in order to avoid a similar fate during the assembly elections due in next November.

The vague slogans of eradicating corruption have miserably failed to attract people's votes. The most talked-about corrupt leaders like Sukh Ram, Jayalalitha, etc, accused of involvement in umpteen corruption scandals, have achieved impressive victories. The bourgeois political commentators have failed to elucidate this phenomenon satisfactorily.

The accused in corruption scandals win elections because the people who vote for them do not decide whether they are corrupt on the basis of press reports. Nor do the people take such decisions on the basis of volleys of accusations and counter-accusations hurled at one another by the various parliamentary parties because of the poor credibility of election-parties. The people form their judgements on the basis of these leaders' actual conduct vis-a-vis the people in their actual life. Almost all the parliamentary parties and their leaders are corrupt in the eyes of the people. The people hardly see any major difference between the those who are in the news for their corruption scandals and those who are their rival candidates. That is why the vague slogan of eradicating corruption did not cut much ice with the people. On the other hand, the consideration of teaching a lesson to the then ruling party for its immediate anti-people acts is acquiring an added weight with them while casting their votes, even if the people were to vote for a "black thief", in order to wreak vengeance on the ruling party.

A few points having practical implications for the revolutionary forces

- 1. Instability to persist:** These elections have once again brought to the fore the fact that hung parliaments and unstable governments are not some isolated happenings occurring at some specific juncture. This grave problem confronting the Indian ruling classes has acquired the

dimension of a phenomenon. After the decline of the Congress as an all-India party, the BJP has disappointed the ruling classes and the experience of the United Front as a third alternative has proved to be a failure.

As an immediate solution to this crisis, the Indian ruling classes wish for, and seek the possibility of, the Indian parliamentary polity developing two main poles — the Congress and its allies constituting one pole and the BJP and its allies constituting the other. So far as the question of the third alternative is concerned, they seem hardly interested in projecting and establishing any third alternative. But given the preponderance of varying and conflicting social and class interests and the consequent political groupings around these interests in the ruling-class polity of India, multi-polarism in Indian parliamentary politics is going to survive. An immediate solution through bi-polarism will remain a tantalising mirage for the ruling classes.

2. Answerability of the State even further reducing: As a long-term solution to this crisis, the Indian ruling classes are on the lookout for a model of government which not only obscures the autocratic nature of the present Indian State but also marginalises further the role and intervention of the parliament, the assemblies and of the "elected" governments in India's State administration. This is the quintessence of the demand being raised by some representatives of the Indian big bourgeoisie to "keep the economy separate and independent of politics". In a bid to work out some model to marginalise the numerical strength as well as importance of the elected representatives, some suitable form of presidential democracy is being looked into. One important task assigned to the Constitution review panel set up by the BJP-led alliance government is to look into Constitutional amendments to ensure a full five-year term for the parliament. That is, an attempt is being made to do away with the requirement of a majority in parliament for any party or alliance to form the government. Along with this further caricatured form of democracy, constitutional and legal changes are being sought to be made to augment the role and intervention of those organs of the State in the affairs of governance which are not at all answerable to the people.

3. Opportunity for advance of genuinely secular forces: The fate, in these elections, of the secularism of those parties and leaders who defected from U.F. and the Congress to the BJP should prove an eye-opener to all those who nurture the illusion of fighting communalism through parliamentary politics by forming anti-communal poll alliances or so-called anti-communal governments. These developments can be utilised to convince the people that only by jumping into the arena of struggle and by building a class and anti-communalist struggle-movement can communal forces of various hues be tackled.

It can be seen from the conduct of the communal forces, as revealed during these elections, that they had to go on the defensive. In the 1984 parliamentary elections, the BJP could manage to get only two seats. In 1989, when it made the issue of the building of a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya its main election plank and whipped up communal frenzy around this issue, there was a sudden spurt in its vote-share. But after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the resultant communal riots in the country, the instigating and vote-catching potential of the communal electoral issues, after getting exhausted for once, began nose-diving. It was because, with the accentuation of the economic crisis during this period, the class demands and issues of the people started overshadowing their communal concerns. During the elections to the 12th Lok Sabha, the BJP exhibited its dual conduct. On the one hand, it did not intend to leave aside its communal issues, so as not to lose its communal vote-base. On the other hand, it tried to project non-communal issues by downgrading its communal issues so as to extend its influence with parties proclaiming themselves to be secular. Because of this dual intent and conduct of the BJP, it forged an election alliance with several of the so-called secular parties even as these alliance partners failed to arrive at a common election manifesto.

After the elections and with the emergence of the prospect of formation of a BJP-led alliance government, the BJP held back its Hindutva agenda and tried to whitewash, to the extent possible, its communal image. The communal issues (such as abrogation of Article 370, construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and enactment of a uniform civil code) which the BJP had been so enthusiastically projecting all

these years, have been declared as issues which have nothing to do with the Vajpayee government.

The Shiv Sena supremo — Bal Thackeray — had proudly asserted after the demolition of the Babri Masjid that had the Shiv Sainiks not been there, the demolition of the masjid could not have been completed. But during the recent election campaign he could be found advocating that a Ram Mandir should not be built at the site of the Babri Masjid. Rather, a national monument in memory of Mangal Pandey, one of the heroes of the national freedom movement, should be put up there. Similarly, no outstanding role or activity of the communal Muslim leaders, such as the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, was noticed among the Muslim community.

The trend of falling back on a defensive posture on the part of communal forces was quite prominent in Punjab during these elections. The Akali Dal (Badal) had always raised a hue and cry that the Panth (the Sikh community) was in danger, thus aggravating mutual bitterness and tension among Hindus and Sikhs. The Akali Dal had provided political, moral and practical support to the Khalistani terrorists. But during the previous assembly elections, it put its cherished slogan of "Panth in danger" on the back burner and instead raised the slogan of the unity of the Punjabi people. It forged an alliance with the very BJP which had been vehemently supporting the imposition of brute police raj on the people of Punjab in the name of opposing Khalistani terrorism. In this context, an interesting instance is provided by Simranjit Singh Mann, the leader of another Akali Dal faction. He had been a prominent protagonist of Khalistani politics and had been spitting fire against the Hindu community. But during these elections, that very Mann could be seen going to a Hindu mandir and adorning his forehead with a tilak (a Hindu religious mark), chanting "Har har mahadev" slogans, and swearing by Hindu-Muslim-Sikh unity.

The revolutionary forces should take maximum advantage of the prevailing objective situation, which has put the communalist forces of various hues on the defensive, and make strenuous efforts to rout these forces by exposing their duality.

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4. Ruling classes resort to national chauvinism and militarism: Although the BJP has temporarily held back its communal agenda, it is bound to maintain its communal base. For that purpose, it is sure to increasingly resort to whipping up communally-tainted national chauvinism. The prevailing anti-Pakistan atmosphere provides fertile land for it, which makes it easy to incite anti-Muslim sentiment. Other ruling class parties may oppose communal issues of the BJP as and when they please, but they will be ideologically disarmed in the face of the BJP's weapon of national chauvinism because instigating reactionary national chauvinism is the basic policy of the Indian State.

The Indian ruling classes are trying, under the slogan of unity and solidarity of the country, to incite the national chauvinist feelings of the Indian people in order to suppress the armed struggles of several nationalities of India. In order to justify the ruthless use of military force against the people of J & K and the north-eastern states, the Pakistani secret services are being blamed for fomenting trouble in these states. Apart from this, efforts are being made to incite communal national chauvinism by linking with the I.S.I. each and every act of a communal riot or bomb-blasts in other parts of the country. Now, with the coming of the BJP to power, this phenomenon is bound to get intensified.

In order to defend the Indian State from the ongoing and potential popular struggles as well as from the centrifugal tendencies among the ruling classes, and in the name of self-defence from external aggression, a serious danger of militarisation of the Indian State looms large over the heads of the Indian people. The BJP can prove a better instrument for this militarisation. Hence the revolutionary forces need to intensify their efforts to politically resist these monstrous designs of the ruling classes, expose the bug-bear of the I.S.I., and the danger of the militarisation of the Indian State.

5. Reality of 'swadeshi' slogan: With the ulterior motive of misusing the national feelings of the people, the ruling class parties, the BJP (and Sangh Parivar) in particular, are trying the hypocritical slogan of 'swadeshi' in the economic sphere. With the present dismal performance of the Indian economy and especially with the collapse of the financial system in the south-east Asian countries, the Indian ruling

classes and their political representatives have been pushed, to some extent, on the defensive in their drive for "liberalisation" and "globalisation" of the Indian economy. The ruling class parties are showing a bit of enhanced concern for the "defence of native industry". This misleading slogan does not mean the defence of the multitudinous small scale industry, which is native industry in the real sense of the term. Instead, it means the defence of the Indian comprador big bourgeoisie industry, which is inseparably bound with international finance capital. The defence of the Indian big bourgeoisie that these parties are claiming to make, also does not mean preventing the multinational companies or their products from entering the Indian market. It only means that along with the concessions being given to the multinational companies at the cost of the Indian people, the Indian big bourgeoisie should also get more concessions.

6. Integration of concrete struggles with struggles against overall policy of ruling classes: Another phenomenon that has come to light during these elections is that the very same party that has received a severe beating in some state, being the ruling party there, has proved fairly successful in some other state, being the party in opposition in that state. This phenomenon reveals that the people, in general, are reacting politically in accordance with the impact of the local politics and policies that affect their interests concretely and immediately as compared to the national-level politics, policies and programmes. Similarly, even though all the ruling class and revisionist parties are in broad consensus on the implementation of the "new economic policy" at the national level, nevertheless, those parties had to pay the most heavily for this anti-national policy in those states where they had to implement concretely this new economic policy — for instance, where such parties increased bus fares, or the rates for electricity or water, etc. For the revolutionary forces, such political behaviour of the people calls attention to the fact that the new economic policy or other anti-people policies like this cannot be effectively exposed among the people through mere general propaganda. For the effective exposure of such anti-people policies, the essential thing is that the general propaganda against such policies be linked with their concrete applied forms. On the other hand, if the concrete local

problems of the people and the local events of exploitation and oppression are not linked to the national-level general politics and policy-tactics of the ruling classes, then the local-level and limited political awareness of the people cannot be raised to the level of developed and comprehensive awareness.

7. Implications of increasing exposure of the BSP: During the past period, the ESP leaders had, to a certain extent, succeeded in raising hopes among a section of the dalits that the dalit masses can have a share in political power within the casteist parliamentary politics. The formation of the Mayawati government in U.P. twice had played a special role in raising such hopes. But afterwards, the development of some assembly members of the BSP defecting to the BJP, the mutual selfish wranglings among the BSP leaders and now, the noticeable defeat of the BSP, especially of Kanshi Ram himself, in the recently concluded elections, have given a severe jolt to these hopes of the dalit masses and this situation has posed a question in their minds: "What next?"

A favourable situation has developed for the revolutionary forces to make the dalit masses understand that sectarian casteist politics cannot unite the labouring sections of the different castes considered to be low-born; rather, it ultimately pits them against one another on the basis of caste; that through parliamentary politics, only a few parliamentary leaders can enjoy a share in the political power and not the dalit masses themselves; being aware of this reality, these leaders would easily defect from any party of the dalits to join any party of the higher castes wherein they find the possibility of getting a better share in political power.

Now a situation has emerged wherein the BSP leadership and its caste-based ideology and politics can be brought under criticism to a greater extent than what was possible in the past. But the dalit masses should not be made to feel that their caste-based identity is being denied through such criticism. While emphatically projecting social injustice and laying emphasis on the exposure of the casteist oppression perpetrated by the ruling classes, the narrow casteist politics and ideology of the BSP leadership can be brought under prudent attack.

Objective conditions cry out for advance of revolutionary movement

The developments related with the elections to the 12th Lok Sabha and the formation of the Vajpayee government have brought to the fore the fact that the objective conditions are becoming more conducive for the strengthening and expansion of the revolutionary movement. For the ruling classes, the crisis of their parliamentary politics, and especially the crisis of forming a stable government, still continues to persist. They are unable, as yet, to find any temporary or permanent solution to it. On the one hand, the restlessness among the people is touching new heights while, on the other, the ruling classes are facing an acute drought of illusionary or diversionary slogans. On the one hand, the casteist politics of the ruling classes is not paying adequate dividends for them, while on the other, an urge for social justice, equality and share in political power among the dalit masses is getting more and more powerful. With the coming to the fore of the class demands/issues of the people, religious, communal and fanatic forces have been pushed to defensive postures. On the one hand, the imperialist pressure for a speedier and comprehensive implementation of the new economic policy is mounting on the Indian ruling classes, while on the other, the sharp political reaction of the people on facing the concrete consequences of the new economic policy, is becoming a great headache for the ruling classes. This grave, difficult and complicated situation for the ruling classes and ruling class politics cries out for the speedy advance of the revolutionary forces.

24th April, 1998.

Statement

The Delhi Nurses' Struggle is a Just Struggle and Deserves Support

Some 11,000 nurses from 28 government hospitals in the country's capital city are entering the 11th day of their declared indefinite strike. The strike call was given by the Delhi Nurses Union (DNU) when it found that the newly installed government with its so-called 'national agenda for governance' had no intention to fulfil a commitment made by its predecessor in September last year to concede better pay and conditions to the nurses on the basis of the Pay Commission's recommendations but without its anomalies. The Vajpayee government says it is not empowered to remove any anomalies from the Pay Commission's recommendations but must refer the anomalies to an Anomalies Committee. Knowing that this sounds the death-knell for any justice by sheer procrastination, the DNU gave its strike call on May 4.

Since then, the nurses of Delhi have shown a fighting spirit and defiance that are a welcome addition to the struggle movements in the country. Having continued the strike after the ministry withdrew a compromise package they were on the verge of accepting, they have gone on to reject the second package which would divide their forces by offering benefits first to some 20 per cent of the nurses. Moreover, as a political act they have rejected the mediation by the minister for parliamentary affairs deputed by the Prime Minister to mediate between the Union health minister and the Delhi minister for health on the one hand and the nurses on the other, claiming he was politicking. When he performed, instead of further talks, when he performed withdrew, they wrote asking the health minister to put the latest offer on paper and send it for their consideration.

The nurses' modest and just demands pertain to a hike in pay in line with the earlier commitment, the merging of 25 per cent of the allowances with the basic pay, allocations for a nurses' housing colony, time-bound promotions, filling of vacancies, and a Directorate of Nurses to address their problems and grievances.

The response of the BJP government to the nurses' strike is in line with the ongoing casual treatment and fierce repression of the working people in general. It has been arrogant, vindictively repressive, and anti-people. The government, shamelessly yielding from day-one to foreign finance and comprador capital but for form's sake promising in its "National Agenda for Governance" to make labour "both organised and unorganised, an equal and proud partner in the production of the nation's wealth and in its progress", has so far taken the following steps. By the sixth day of the strike, the draconian Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) was invoked and 12 nurses sacked. Medical superintendents were directed to mark a break in the services of the striking nurses. Hundreds of nurses were served notices to quit their accommodation for "new recruits". Over six hundred on-contract nurses have been recruited with "walk-in" interviews. The DNU announced that the police were dragging nursing staff out of their hostels to force them to join duty. Disciplinary proceedings were being instituted against several others. Government threatened to lodge FIRs and to make arrests. The BJP summoned help from its governments in neighbouring states and its allied parties, as if for an all-round political fight. Thus Rajasthan's BJP government despatched 40 nurses to Delhi from the environs of Jaipur. And the nurses union in Punjab had to announce that it would not allow the Akali-BJP government to despatch their nurses. The official mass media unleashed their anti-nurses propaganda by depicting the plight of the suffering patients and holding the strikers responsible for it.

In giving appropriate reply, the nurses have shown sensitivity to the plight of the patients and the sense to mobilise democratic opinion. They have appealed to the sense of fair play of the public; argued how the government and not they are responsible for the sufferings of the patients because it is they who have gone back on commitments and forced the nurses to strike. Their argument has been: "We have chosen

a profession to serve the sick and we feel for our patients; but we have to fight for a reasonable status within society." They have approached the National Commission for Women and claimed support of its chairperson. They have approached the national Press and pressed home their cause. They propagated the significance of International Nurses' Day, Florence Nightingale's birthday on May 12, and pointed to the shameful treatment of the profession today. They have appealed to nurses elsewhere: Already, nurses' unions in Punjab, Haryana and Maharashtra have extended their support through their own partial agitations and by joining the DNU's sit-in outside the Union health ministry's headquarters. The nurses of the two railway hospitals in Delhi and four other hospitals were to join the strike in support. On May 13 the entire staff of PGI Chandigarh, which had been sitting in dharna for two hours each morning, went on mass casual leave for a whole 24 hours also in support of the Delhi strikers. The Rajasthan Nurses' Association had promptly objected to the despatch of the 40 nurses to Delhi and demanded their recall. The Tamil Nadu Nurses Association sent messages of support. In the midst of such mobilisation, some of the national newspapers too, otherwise pro-establishment, have been driven to write sympathetic editorials, portraying the hardships and the humanity of the nursing profession, and recommending a civilized approach by the government in seeking a solution. According to the DNU, several trade unions and people's organisations have expressed solidarity. Agency reports were that several such have condemned the vindictive repression by the State.

Among the many organisations and groups that will express support will necessarily be some of the fronts of the ruling class and parliamentary parties hoping to gather in some support structures for themselves from among the nurses. The National Kisan Mazdoor Congress (NKMC), for instance, has extended sympathy and appealed to Sonia Gandhi to "intervene on behalf of the nurses." With such "friends", the struggling nurses even as they gather strength in struggle will be even more in need of real friends and of solidarity from other sections of working people.

Revolutionaries need to organise, in whatever way they can, such support and propaganda for this fighting and oppressed section of the medical hierarchy; propagate their real contribution in the medical sphere, how their background and their work qualifies them as part of the mass

of working people; and indicate the significance of their organisation, fight, and defiance for the women's democratic movement as well. Propaganda aimed at the organised nurses needs to expose to these valiant strikers, who have withstood sops to divide their ranks, the other danger of being sucked into the vortex of inducements from the parliamentary parties, if the political strength of the present strike is to be consolidated for the future of the nursing profession in Delhi and elsewhere.

14th May 1998.

Hamco Agreement

A Tactical Step, Partial Gains, Need to Deepen the Struggle

-- by a correspondent

Malkangiri Zilla Adibasi Sangh's struggle against the big tin ore company, Hamco and Reme, was stopped temporarily after the signing of an agreement on 8th December, 1997, the subsequent improvement of that agreement on 9th January, and the final signing of it on 24th February, 1998. Here we record the various events and compulsions through which both the Sangh and the company passed prior to the signing of the agreement, the various forces and compulsions operating throughout the struggle, and how the Sangh resolved its inner contradictions to wage the struggle as well as how it handled the contradictions that developed in the course of struggle. In fact even the agreement is being seen as a temporary withdrawal of the Sangh's forces from the frontline in order to further unite and consolidate its own forces such that the present temporary gains can be consolidated fully for future struggle. On the other hand, the main present task of the Sangh in this front will be to guard and develop its newly emerged forces and supervise the implementation of various sections of the agreement.

While the struggle was concentrated mainly in two panchayats — Moupadar and Temurpal — the new activists were drawn mainly from the surrounding panchayats, namely, Padmagiri, Pandripani, Katapali, Jharapali, Birlakhanpur, Tandki and Chalanguda. During the struggle, the organisation extended itself to certain new panchayats such as Bhejaguda, Chedenga, Pangam, and Salmi around the pocket of struggle. Thus the need for a committee in this zone for day-to-day guidance of the movement was sharply felt. Moreover, it was difficult for the district

leadership, who function from Tarlakota, to provide guidance from about 80 kilometres away from the struggle zone. So, in August 1997, an intermediary zonal committee was formed, in between of the panchayat committee and the district committee. Thereafter all the mobile teams (four to five) deployed by the central office of the Sangh to organise and lead the struggle started to coordinate well among themselves. Within two to three months of such smooth functioning it was felt that for the other areas, too, at least two more zonal committees need to be formed. But since all the forces of the Sangh from throughout the district were engaged in the movement, this task had to wait for some more time. Finally, in January 1998, shape was given to the two would-be zonal committees by forming two organising teams. This was done when the central leadership could get some breathing time after the final agreement.

The struggle was waged against Hamco and Reme on the one hand, but also on the other hand against the smugglers who own smelting 'chullahs' (small kilns). In the second week of May, people's wrath expressed itself in the killing of a hated sahukar of Kamanpali village, Appalaswamy Sagadia, who was simultaneously the main smuggler of tin ores and an agent of Hamco. Hamco and Reme, while operating in the area, try not to antagonise the smugglers. Rather, they appease them by offering them contract work and by even purchasing ore from them at black market rates and regularly transporting these out of the area. The killing of Appalaswamy Sagadia by the masses had a double effect: It immediately put an end to the support to such dealers by Hamco, and spread panic among its officials (including the Malaysian experts), who fled from the area. At the same time, the traditional smugglers dared not confront the Sangh when the people broke their chullahs.

Both these sections, therefore, began to think of new tactics to manage the struggling tribals. Their new tactic was of appeasement, while the Government took to the tacit of repression and institution of innumerable police cases.

It has to be noted that, in the course of this struggle against the traditional smugglers, a part of the local people and a handful of activists too turned hostile to the Sangh. The problem could arise because of

the local people's deep feelings regarding their right over the tin ore either dug by them in the hills or found in their own land. The decade-long practice of the Orissa Mining Corporation, of acquiring tin ores by offering a nominal price of about Rs 60 per kilogram of ore, helped to justify such practices as normal. So the detractors of the Sangh used this to justify "people's right to sell their ores". When a charter of demands was prepared by the Sangh in August, or when even before that in June a declaration of the Sangh about mining of tin ores was propagated, these detractors (a section of them linked with the smelting chullahs and another section of them erstwhile activists, who, owing to their recent opportunistic political links and their connections with the timber lobby have tried to disintegrate the Sangh from within) rejected the objectives by taking an ultra-revolutionary stand. They propagated that "When we have given the slogan 'Hamco-Reme go back', there should be no revision of it and that any policy declaration or charter of demands is a diversion."

However, their role in the struggle was quite contrary. When the main activists were busy developing new forms of struggle and applying them, these detractors were spreading all slander against the main leadership and diverting a section of the local people by engaging them to dig tin ores or to loot Hamco ore deposits which Hamco itself would finally procure. Taking advantage of the company's absence now, they would themselves start small scale ore transportation. They knew well that, owing to the role played by some of them in the Padmagiri movement, it would be difficult for the Sangh to oppose them directly. Worse still, the inherent militancy of the Koya community, their extraordinary ability to unite, and their suspiciousness of the non-Koyas, were all used by the detractors for their own purpose.

Alert to all these likely moves, the Sangh gave due importance to this community while forming the Sabani zonal committee. The Koyas had about 70 per cent representation in this committee. Its head office too was located in a Koya village, Phatiatang, about eight kilometres from Padmagiri towards Moupadar.

Moupadar-Salmi-Temurpali area was mainly populated by the Durna community. Politically these Durnas have been dominated by the Koyas. Long ago, they had migrated from Madhya Pradesh to this part of Orissa. Widespread illiteracy, regular drinking habit, comparatively less

attachment to agricultural land, and lack of any struggle history make them easy targets for offering temptations and engaging in opportunistic practices. Thus the struggle against Hamco and Reme and against ore smuggling was an utterly new experience for them.

In the early stages, the forms of struggle practised here by the Sangh were: investigation teams, cultural teams (including full-night drama on the life of Birsa Munda), village-to-village marching with traditional weapons, breaking of wine bhatts, destroying liquor on the market day, investigation of police bribery cases, and compelling of police officials to return the bribe-money. Thus, slowly, the local people were brought into the orbit of struggle and associated with the more basic questions of tribal struggle, such as land and forest. This long-drawn struggle was a school of politicisation for them. The Sangh could get mass support in various forms and all fields in this area. The people confronted Hamco and police forces, gave protection to the Sangh activists, and built up gates and guarded them. In all these, the women showed more stamina and leadership quality compared to the men. No doubt some Durna leaders developed as orators and showed certain militancy in confrontations with the enemies. But because of their political immaturity they were now and then swayed by the detractors. Generally it was some among the ward members, the samity members, and the sarpanches of the area who were utilised by the detractors against the Sangh.

Thus, by November 1997, the situation was as follows. On the one hand the Government was trying to colour the whole movement as a mere 'law and order' problem involving some 'outside instigators'. The Collector thus ordered the S.P. to make a list of such 'anti-social' elements so that proper action can be taken against them. The so-called tripartite meeting called by the Collector in September was boycotted by the Sangh, but Hamco attended and dittoed all the repression proposals of the Collector. In response, the Sangh built up pressure on the Government by organising rallies on the outskirts of Malkangiri and the struggle area. It asked the Collector for a public apology for having accused the Sangh of being "outside instigators." It explained the issues of the struggle and the problem of exploitation in Malkangiri district.

The police instituted cases against the Sangh activists; but when the police party went to arrest the Sangh activists it was heckled by the women and had to return. Hamco, on the other hand, tried to open its factory by bribing a section of the local leadership, by contributing to different ruling class parties and by giving money to the police. The local MLAs tried to make tours to convince the people but their meetings were poorly attended. At two points the people heckled them. The Collector wanted to tour the area, but did not dare enter the area openly.

The Sangh's area of operation extended to the Koraput border, near Ramgiri. People from new areas came forward with proposals that the organisation be formed in their area.

Hamco, meanwhile, with the help of the revenue inspector of Salmi, the local ward member, and the police official of Moupadar, tried to enter into a secret agreement with some land owners for the sale of their land to Hamco. This was strongly opposed and Hamco officials were gheraoed. Objections were sent by the peasants to the tehsildar with regard to this. The Collector was gheraoed by the Sangh activists at Tarlakota; he promised to call a tripartite discussion. But nothing came of it.

At this juncture, on November 2, just one day after the women of Haldikund compelled a police party to go back and five days after the Hamco officials were gheraoed at Durmaguda camp, the chief general manager of Hamco turned up at the MZAS office and offered a proposal for bipartite discussion. This was Hamco's first 'friendly' gesture since the charter of demands was submitted to them in August. Rather, their reply by letter to the charter had been a point-blank refusal of all the demands 'on legal grounds'. It had even refused to properly recognise the Sangh.

So when the Sangh representatives and Hamco-Reme officials sat for talks on 6th November and 16th November it was on the basis of Hamco having withdrawn this letter. At the 16th November talks, the director of Hamco was ready to concede half the demands. He requested that, since the government was not taking any steps for tripartite talks, we should try for a bipartite settlement. He showed the power-of-attorney given to him by the Board of Directors, and offered to recognise whatever decision was taken by the Sangh. He agreed to pay compensation for

occupied anabadi and forest land to the tribals, but requested that the compensation formula set in the charter be reconsidered.

On 17th November, a meeting was held of about 300 activists from the area. All the proposals were discussed there and debated. At last a new compensation formula was arrived at and communicated to the director of Hamco. The Sangh's president wrote a letter to the Collector, urging him to attend a tripartite meeting on 7th December at the Sangh's office. Another letter was written to Hamco for a bipartite discussion on 6th December. The Collector very shrewdly called a bipartite discussion with the Sangh on 28th November, but the letter was delivered very late, so it reached the office on 1st December. Thus the government's policy of avoiding any tripartite talks was crystal clear. At the same time, Hamco's official letter came to the Sangh in which it refused the proposals the Sangh had given on 16th November. It also refused the new compensation formula of the MZAS which demanded only 35 years' cost of production for acquired land and 10 years' cost of land leased for one year.

By 5th December, everything was against the Sangh. The question of the agreement was put aside, its possibility being remote. Although the 6th December bipartite talks were not refused point-blank by Hamco, all the developments were pointing towards that.

On 5th December, the Executive Board decided to re-start the struggle in the event of the failure of the agreement proposal. At the same time, the above-mentioned detractors were openly engaged in digging ores from the Guruguda pocket. A number of activists from Tandki Chalanguda area went underground after gheraoing and heckling the Collector on 29th November. Taking this opportunity, the sarpanch and samity member of Chalanguda congregated some of their forces and looted some of the Sangh villages when the activists were underground.

At this juncture, the Hamco officials came to the office with new proposals at their appointed time (i.e., 4 p.m. in the afternoon) and, strangely, apart from accepting the demands apparently accepted on 6th November, they also accepted some more demands such as opening up of a smelting plant in the district, more employment to the local youths, and the revised compensation formula set forth by the Sangh

as to be applicable to all types of land — both patta-land and land without pattas.

Meetings and discussion went on for three days. And, on 8th December, virtually in the early hours of 9th December, the bipartite agreement was signed between MZAS and Hamco-Reme. Later, this agreeemtn was further improved on 9th January, in the presence of Hamco President H.M. Patel.

The demands pertaining to the government domain were kept aside and immediately referred to the state government, through the Collector, as a separate charter of demands. This too got proper mention in the agreement.

Thus, with all these conditions, this agreement was signed. Hence there should be no illusion or confusion in anybody's mind: the struggle is not over. Proper implementation of this agreement has to be struggled for. That will compel Hamco to spend crores of rupees in building up a smelting factory and paying up huge compensation amounts; on the other hand, since government is not a party to this agreement, and at every level it has expressed its disapproval and displeasure, only as long as the Sangh is able to prove itself as a force in the area will Hamco oblige. However, it will always try to develop parallel forces so that it can evade the clauses of the agreement.

Indeed, the process of a parallel organisation has already started wherein the detractor forces have joined hands with the ruling class parties and the timber lobby. Thus the days ahead are going to be days of fierce struggle. The Sangh is planning diligently to prepare itself to take up such a struggle by regular politicisation of militants and building up of self-defence units to face repression with traditional weapons along with the task of consolidating the Sangh forces.

The improved version of the agreement was finally signed on 23rd February. Its precis is given at the end of this article.

Postscript — 22nd April 1998

As regards the agreement with Hamco at the end of April, the situation is as follows. After two months of pressure, compensation was paid for the land acquired for the construction of the beneficiation plant. It was Rs one lakh per acre to three land owner adivasis. But the rules

were not strictly followed with regard to the involvement of the whole action committee. Only the President of MZAS and the struggle area committee secretary were present. Since it was a problem of the Sangh's own organisation, it was debated in the E.C. and the President accepted the criticism of his being hasty and not communicating other members of the action committee, and promised not to repeat this.

As a result of this mistake, however, the concerned adivasis could not properly understand the political implications of such payment, and at least in one case a larger part of the cash was wrongly distributed among the six brothers and the money mis-spent. Of course, later, the political aspect of such compensation was discussed in detail. Apart from taking the issue at the Executive Body level, it was also taken up in the bilateral discussion with Hamco. The director was accused of creating dissension among the members of the action committee, by giving more attention to some members. All this was in the month of February.

In March, without any communication to the Sangh, Hamco went on negotiating with the villagers of Kamarpali for construction of a temple, where earlier, the MZAS gate had been built and well-guarded. Because of this gate, Hamco had been compelled earlier to declare the amount of its ores already mined before the movement itself was strong enough. About 40 tonnes of such ore are still there at Reme's Mundaguda camp. At the time of the agreement, Hamco wanted to discuss this point so as to shift it, but the Sangh had not acceded.

Now taking advantage of the conciliatory environment created by the agreement, Hamco-Reme wanted to woo away Kamarpalians by showing themselves to be specially concerned about them, by trying to bore a tubewell and then by constructing a pacificatory temple. The Sangh raised the slogan — "We want a hospital, not a temple". Accordingly, the Sangh also conveyed its protest. But the work was not stopped, since it is strongly related with the villagers' religious sentiment which Hamco was out to exploit. This temple was being built to the people's traditional deity — Bangramma — a Koya goddess who cures all disease and drives away all evil forces. The work has been slowed down, however.

During the agreement, it was decided that no pitting would be

allowed unless the land was leased out for it and drilling work would be taken up only during the survey period. For each such hole, the land-holder would be paid Rs 500/- and the holes would be filled up by the company. But on 6th March, a letter was issued to the Sangh communicating that pitting and anger pitting have been started in Mundaguda-Kamarpali area at the rate of Rs 100/- for each pit.

By that time, all the activists were dispersed, a rally was being planned at Chitrakonda in March, and it could be taken up only towards 22nd March, after the March 20th rally of Tapu people, in the piloting committee. But in the meantime the copy of the letter was lost. The piloting committee sent a team to the area to investigate the matter. By 25th March, the local activists strongly protested the pitting activities and, from 26th March, Hamco stopped all such activities.

At this time, MZAS decided to publish the agreement with an introduction, telling the people how this agreement was signed, the struggle of the Sangh behind such an agreement, the conspiratorial moves of the company in floating a parallel organisation, and the way it tries to enter into ever fresh agreements with different villages and organisations, and at last giving the responsibility of implementation of this agreement to the people of the district as well as the state of Orissa.

In the meantime, a letter was issued to Hamco-Reme, condemning their attempt to violate the agreement before even the ink had dried. They were called for discussion on 11th April.

Only three local officials came for discussion this time. The Sangh told them point-blank that, no excuses, no explanations, we have already planned to go for our May Day rally at Durmaguda itself before the gate of Hamco, and that unless some fresh understanding can be made, that day would be the date of the declaration of another movement.

After this, the officials have visited the office on 22nd March and fixed 23rd of April for their next visit.

22 April 1998.

APPENDIX: Main Points of December 8, 1997, Agreement between Hamco-Reme and Malkangiri Zilla Adibasi Sangh (MZAS) at the end of an initial struggle against the company and the authorities.

The agreement covers the mining operations of Hamco-Reme in a total of five blocks containing 6,345 hectares spread over 26 villages.

The demands of MZAS in respect of the state government are to be referred to the state government (security of tribal lands, including pattas; compensation for digging by Orissa Mining Corporation; withdrawal of police cases; etc.).

Hamco agrees to set up the tin ore smelting plant in Malkangiri itself by October 1999.

Compensation is to be paid at between Rs 25,000/yr and Rs 35,000/yr per acre, depending on the type of land (to be identified jointly). Importantly, compensation is to be paid to both patta-holders and 'encroachers'. Mining land is to be returned to the landowner within one year of the start of mining, after making it again suitable for cultivation. The beneficiation plant area will be compensated at the rate of Rs one lakh/acre. Rs 500 is to be paid per drilling point to the landowner. There is to be no drilling during cultivation, or when there are standing crops. Rs 5,000 is to be paid for each fruit tree damaged. There is to be no land dealing without the knowledge and deliberation of the Sangh.

There is to be no cutting of forest trees; in case it is absolutely necessary, it can only be done with the approval of the Sangh.

Hamco assures that it will not export tin ingots from the country. It has invited the Atomic Mineral division to open a branch in the area to take possession of atomic minerals found in the course of the mining.

Priority is to be given in employment to people of Malkangiri, and then to Orissa. Employees, including unskilled labourers, are to be made permanent after 240 days. Retrenched workers are to be reinstated. Casual labour will be hired from a common pool, with a minimum 10-20 days' work per month for each labourer.

Hamco will set up a six-bed hospital with a doctor, nurses, compounder, etc, distributing free medicine and free care to the people of the area. It will be run by a board of trustees composed of local people, selected through the Sangh. Six tubewells are to be dug by Hamco according to the directions of the local people. Two schools are to be run by Hamco; moreover, one M.E. School, one high school, and one school for the blind, deaf and dumb are also to be set up and run by Hamco.

The implementation of the agreement will be monitored by an Action Committee of the MZAS, consisting of the MZAS president and secretary, the secretary of MZAS Saberi zonal committee, and the secretary of the MZAS mining area branch committee. The Action Committee and the Hamco-Reme joint committee will settle all disputes arising out of the implementation of the agreement. There will also be review meetings once a year on the implementation of the agreement.

Punjab

Correct Understanding on Elections Bears Fruit in Campaign

— by a correspondent

During the recently-concluded Lok Sabha elections, three trends were distinctly discernible among the communist revolutionary and democratic revolutionary forces of Punjab on the issue of elections.

First, a section comprising of CPI-ML (Jan Shakti), CPI-ML (Liberation), and some other smaller groups opted for active participation in the poll by putting up their candidates in various constituencies. The CPI-ML (Jan Shakti) contested elections with the slogan of calling a new constituent assembly based on elected representatives of various classes and social strata to rewrite a new constitution. The CPI-ML (Liberation), though an insignificant force in Punjab, also entered the fray at two places. Some more small groups and democratic mass fronts joined the 'democratic poll process' in the form of supporting this or that 'pro-people' party or candidate.

Secondly, another section of the democratic revolutionary forces rejected the very idea of participation in any circumstances whatsoever and put forth the slogan of active 'boycott' of the elections. The CPI-ML (Party Unity), Jamhoori Morcha Punjab, and Lok Sangram Manch, etc, were the votaries of this boycott line.

Thirdly, a good chunk of communist revolutionary and democratic revolutionary forces such as CPRCI-ML, the Lok Morcha Punjab, Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union, and a few more organisations unequivocally rejected the parliamentary path, yet they neither advocated participation nor gave the slogan of active boycott of the elections. Instead, they advocated and launched an independent and active political campaign

for exposing this sham democracy and for projecting a programme of revolutionary political alternative to usher in a genuine people's democracy and pro-people regime.

The tactical participation professedly for exposure of the parliamentary system by the adherents of the participation line, turned out to be a process of exposure of their bankrupt political line itself. They could neither build an effective campaign for propagating and projecting their viewpoint nor succeed in garnering enough votes for their candidates. Notwithstanding their drive aimed solely at getting maximum votes, none of their candidates could get more than three thousand votes. Likewise, the poll boycotters, too, failed to make a dent. There was hardly any instance of an organised poll boycott at their behest by even a score of people. Their activity remained limited to posters and leaflets. So, their poll boycott slogan proved to be infertile.

The 'Inquilab Zindabad Campaign' by Lok Morcha Punjab

In sharp contrast with the ruling class parties scrambling after people's votes for grabbing political power, the Lok Morcha Punjab in alliance with the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union and the Revolutionary Democratic Front of electricity employees, launched (as they had done at the time of February 1997 Assembly elections) a vigorous 'Inquilab Zindabad Campaign'. The aim of this campaign was to expose the bankruptcy of vote politics and the treachery of the vote parties and to project a programme of revolutionary political alternative before the people of Punjab. No doubt, the various sectors of the people, through their own bitter experience of 50 years of this sham democracy, had themselves seen through the farce of parliamentary politics and were utterly disgusted with it as with the discredited ruling class parties. Even so, the concrete exposure of the newly-coined slogans of the various ruling class parties and the corrupt parliamentary system remained an important task before the democratic revolutionary forces. The imperialist-sponsored ruling classes' onslaught on the livelihood and lives of the Indian people constituted another important issue which needed to be thoroughly exposed. Most important of all, the projection of a viable revolutionary political alternative before the people,

disillusioned with the present system, remains a crying need of the hour. All such issues constituted the core of the revolutionary propaganda offensive of the democratic revolutionary forces throughout the campaign.

A preparatory education drive

Last year, the sudden announcement of the February 1997 Assembly elections had left little time with the Lok Morcha Punjab and its ally organisations to make adequate preparations for equipping their activists and ranks with revolutionary propaganda material and methods. During the recently-held Lok Sabha poll, this job was more thoroughly done by these organisations. The state committee of Lok Morcha Punjab, held a spate of meetings of all its lower units and activists in which discussions were organised on wide-ranging issues connected with the elections. Particular emphasis was laid on projecting the revolutionary alternative programme. Similar meetings were also reported to have been held by the ally organisations of the Morcha. These educative meetings helped the apex Morcha leadership to give its lower units greater initiative in organising the campaign. The decentralisation of the campaign organising process bore good fruit and resulted in wider dissemination of the propaganda and much greater mobilisation of the people.

The propaganda offensive

The organisers of the 'Inquilab Zindabad Campaign' made scathing attacks on the present parliamentary system, its various institutions, the ruling class vote-parties, and the government, sharply indicting them for the ills and various problems of the people. The ruling classes' servility to the world imperialists, the arm-twisting tactics being used by the imperialists, the imperialist-dictated onslaught by the ruling classes on the lives of the Indian toiling people, etc, were noted and exposed during the campaign. The unbridled corruption at the highest echelons of governance; the intensifying imperialist plunder of cheap Indian labour, raw material resources, vast Indian market, and premier public sector enterprises; the process of deindustrialisation of the country in the name of 'modernisation' and 'globalisation'; the ever-increasing and deteriorating unemployment problem; rising indebtedness of the country;

wage squeezes and rising prices of essential commodities; and above all, the swelling numbers of families below the official poverty line, etc., were all shown as the direct outcome and bitter fruits of the imperialist onslaught on the country. The undiminished stranglehold of the feudal forces in the vast country's de, the tyrannical feudal oppression, the vast section of the impoverished peasantry remaining pinned to the land, and the rural penury, were all portrayed as elements which together with the plunder of the capital were responsible for holding back the development of the country.

The slogans of the ruling class parties — especially the slogan of 'stable government, able prime minister' coined by the BJP combine, in overzealous claimant to the Delhi throne — were ridiculed and torn to shreds. The campaigners laid bare the class content of this ruling-class. They emphasised that the ruling classes needed stability and an able prime minister not for ensuring decent wages to the workers or remunerative prices to the peasants; not for checking price rises or solving the unemployment problem; not for redistributing lands to the landless; not for putting an end to the imperialist plunder, etc, but for ensuring, with brute force, of course, the implementation of the policy measures aimed at fattening imperialist capital, the comprador capital, the landlords and the feudals and the other ruling class elements, at the cost of the exploited toiling sections. The ruling classes of India lacked the political will to solve the burning basic problems of the people of India. They can only aggravate further these problems of the people. The people of India need to overthrow the present ruling classes of India and their perverted regime lock, stock and barrel for realising their own basic demands.

The initiative exercised by the local committees in organising the propaganda helped in integrating the local issues with the overall propaganda thrust of the campaign. These local issues were thus adequately highlighted and their relation to the basic issues of the people as well as to the policy measures of the ruling classes was shown and stressed. Take, for instance, the sewerage problem in a certain locality. Ensuring a healthy and clean environment and the provision of proper sewage disposal facility is the basic duty of any government and an inalienable right of the people. Criticism of the

apathy of the local authorities was extended and linked with the indifference of the ruling classes to the basic problems and linked with the policy-thrust of the ruling classes' governments aimed at further squeezing the paltry sums being spent on providing social services and social welfare. The importance of collective struggles of the people over these issues, and of linking these struggles with effecting pro-people changes in the policies, was stressed. It was stressed time and again that such struggles for pro-people policies alone could usher in a genuine people's democratic State.

The prominent distinguishing feature of the propaganda offensive carried out during the 'Inqilab Zindabad Campaign' was the total rejection of the prevailing regime and its policies and the projection of an alternative programme and policies for the salvation of the country. It was stressed, in no uncertain terms, that only by confiscating the land of the landlords without any compensation and redistributing it among the needy landless and other land-starved peasants; by abolishing all outstanding debts of the rural poor; by confiscating without compensation the imperialist capital and enterprises; by taking over without compensation all comprador capital and undertakings; by cancelling all foreign debt to the imperialists; and by smashing the existing anti-people State apparatus, can the way for the country's progress be paved. It was elucidated how the redistribution of land and other rural assets would help in solving the enormous rural unemployment problem; how it would help liberate the rural productive forces; how the confiscation of imperialist and comprador capital and other assets would plug the drain of the surplus value and generate resources for the rapid industrialisation of the country. By highlighting the burning and basic problems of the people and the utter inability of the present regime in solving them, it was shown how the people's democratic government would be able to solve these problems by its various policies. A special issue on elections brought out by a bi-monthly *Surkh Rekha* proved very beneficial to the activists and organisers of the campaign in imparting a clear vision of the alternative policies of the people's democratic regime to be.

Citing concrete examples of the experience of some countries of the world, the activists impressed upon the audience that the establishment of the people's democratic State was not an utopia but an

achievable scientific goal demanding long and arduous struggle by the people. The organisers called upon the people to get organised, take the path of struggle, unite with other struggling sections of the people in general and with the peasantry in particular, persevere in the struggle, and assert the people's power as against the power of the ruling classes. A broad agrarian revolutionary movement of the peasantry in alliance with the revolutionary movement of other democratic class forces would ultimately succeed in overthrowing the decadent rule of the landlords, imperialists and their other accomplices.

Wherever this propaganda was made, the people listened to it with keen interest and received it very well. The response of the agricultural workers was overwhelming.

Decentralising the campaign organisation

Another feature of the 'Inculab Zindabad Campaign' was the initiative enjoyed by the lower units of the organisations undertaking the campaign. The state committee of the Morcha, for instance, limited itself to chalking out the main features of the campaign and to issuing guidelines for the campaign. A general poster and a leaflet were also issued by it. The specific form and duration of the campaign, the areas and sections of the population to be covered, the location of the main gatherings, the preparation and publication of the propaganda material, the collection of funds and many other such aspects were planned and discussed by the lower units. This democratic process of discussion and decision-making helped the workers in arriving at a distinct and clear picture of their respective roles as well as in proper utilisation of the available material and resources. An unflinching faith in the correctness of their political understanding, clarity of vision of their role, superb planning and immense enthusiasm among the activists helped them plunge into the campaign wholeheartedly and play an exemplary role.

The decentralisation of the campaign organisation effort proved a boon. The organisations involved in the campaign previously depended upon the few state-level speakers and so they had to go through a tough time during such campaigns. This time the units were supposed to rely mainly on their own resources. It necessitated and encouraged

them to pay attention to the problem of preparation of speakers. In the entire course of the campaign, nearly 50 activists discharged the duties of regular speakers, quite a number of them assuming this responsibility for the first time. A crop of 8 to 10 promising speakers have emerged who were not only able to effectively convey the content of the campaign but also qualified as impressive speakers.

The organisation of the campaign at area-levels not only spared the state leaderships for better guidance work but also helped in giving full play to the initiative, organising acumen and leadership qualities of the area teams. The successful conduct of the campaign plans at all places instilled a sense of confidence and satisfaction in the area-level teams. This successful experience will go a long way in enabling the activists to face the future challenges in a more confident way.

The successful mobilisation

The white colonial rulers alleged Indians as unworthy of ruling over their country. Their new-colonial black off-spring — the Indian rulers — too, disdainfully dismiss the women and labouring classes as ignorant and as incapable of managing their affairs. Untiring organised activity, throughout the entire course of the campaign, by fiery bands of household labouring women and men falsified these accusations of the Indian ruling classes. They not only exhibited their usual qualities of intense class-hatred, sacrificing spirit, boldness, steadfastness, and braving of all hardships but also their organising capabilities.

In Malout-Lambi belt, many labouring couples or other members of the rural working classes, oblivious to the innumerable worries about the endemic shortages in their homes and hearths, plunged themselves into the campaign to accelerate its pace. Dedicated teams of labouring men and women took on their inexperienced shoulders the burden of organising propaganda and mobilisation and discharged it well.

The women activists of Bathinda city unit of the Morcha competently shared the burden of propaganda and mobilisation. The active and well-entrenched women activists of the Jaito area took a stride ahead and started addressing gatherings in neighbouring villages. In Ludhiana, the women activists played a key role in the organisation and mobilisation of the campaign. Similarly, at many other places the women activists

worked hand-in-glove with their men comrades. At the top of the list comes a woman activist of farm labourer family of Singhewala village who not only made her maiden speech in the village assembly of labouring people but also dared address a five thousand strong gathering at Malout without any hitch or hesitation and impressed the audience very much.

The 'Inqulab Zindabad Campaign' culminated in various areas in huge area-level gatherings. Political conferences were held at Anandpur Sahib, Ludhiana, Khanna, Fategarh Churian, Jalandhar, Bhutal Kalan (Lehra Gaga), Nihal Singh Wala, Jaito, Bathinda and Malout. The number of participants in these conferences varied from 4-5 hundreds to 4-5 thousands. A common feature at all these places was the encouraging response of the people. Estimates of participation based on the influence and mobilisation capacity of the respective units were either equalled or exceeded at all the places. Approximately 18 to 20 thousand people participated in these conferences throughout Punjab. If all those who participated in the preparatory meetings, rallies and marches are included, then the total number exceeds 30 thousand. The message of the campaign was even further disseminated on a far wider scale through posters and leaflets.

Some features worth noting

A distinct feature of the culminating area-level gatherings lay in the fact that a majority of the participants had to come to these gatherings defying all inducements, pressures, threats and stiff opposition by the ruling class parties and the administration.

In Malout, from where the Punjab chief minister's son was contesting the election, the growing activities of the revolutionary forces were a cause of serious concern for the ruling Akali Dal. The C.M.'s son had himself tried the carrot-and-stick method to win over the leading revolutionary activists to his side but had failed miserably. He had also threatened to ban the Morcha. He had ordered the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union leaders to keep off the Morcha and remain confined to their village or be ready to face serious consequences. On the very day of the Morcha conference, the Punjab C.M. Parkash Singh Badal himself took an unusual step which indicated the nervousness

of the Akalis at the Morcha activities. Going quite out of his way, with a clear motive of foiling the participation in the Morcha conference, the C.M. got a gathering of his three dozen loyalists stage-managed in front of the house of a Morcha activist of his village, himself reached there with all his paraphernalia, and started addressing the gathering. He blew both hot and cold, issuing veiled threats as well as offering sops like liberal loans and jobs. Some supporters of the Morcha began to dither. Unruffled and defiant, the Morcha leader along with his family members boarded his vehicle and set out for the conference raising revolutionary slogans. Impressed and emboldened by this courageous defiance by the Morcha leader, nearly 80 men and women followed suit and reached the conference site.

In village Khudian, falling in the same area, an Akali leader threatened the village labourers with boycott of their labour if they dared attend the Malout Morcha conference. He even slapped an agricultural worker of the village but a strong and spontaneous reaction of the village people forced him to apologise. In many other villages of the area, the landlords came into open opposition against the Morcha conference and intimidated the village poor from participating in the conference.

In Bathinda city, the activities of the Morcha supporters during the municipal elections had annoyed the die-hard supporters of all the electoral parties and resulted in open political polarisation. As a result of this polarisation, the participation in the Morcha conference witnessed their opposition.

In Bhutal Kalan, a corrupt local leader tried to disrupt the conference by spreading rumours and canards, but he was adequately rebuffed by the people and the conference proved to be a resounding success. Similar attempts were made at several other places but to no avail. Some shrewd elements among the ruling class parties adopted appeasing tactics at some places but they were tackled in a suitable way. All this speaks volumes for the campaign's success.

As regards the class composition of the participants, the rural agricultural labourers, the city poor, and the small workers-cum-employees dominated these gatherings. In Ludhiana, the industrial workers were in overwhelming numbers, whereas at Jaito, Nihal Singh Wala, Malout and Jalandhar, the agricultural labour men and women

dominated. In Bathinda, the city poor constituted the biggest chunk while rural labourers, small employees, industrial workers and peasants also participated in fair numbers. Household women and youth and students also made their presence felt. In Lehra Gaga, peasants and farm labourers were one to one and the women, if not surpassed them, at least equalled their male counterparts. A good contingent of the F.C.I. workers also took part. The Malout conference was unique in the sense that out of a gathering of over four thousand, the rural labouring sections constituted three-fourths of the gathering and labouring women outdid the men in participation.

The 'Inqulab Zindabad Campaign' succeeded in making further inroads in different sections of the population. In Lehra Gaga-Sunam area, the peasants and rural labourers were stirred in 30 villages. F.C.I. labour was approached for the first time and they responded enthusiastically. In Bathinda city, Inqulab Zindabad slogans reverberated in the basties of the industrial workers and the city poor. Even Sikligars (nomadic tribesmen) participated in the conference. Semi-literate rural and city youth and school and college students were also approached and a good number of them too participated. In Jaito and Faridkot areas, new inroads have been made among the industrial workers and the rural labourers. In Malout and Faridkot areas, the erstwhile supporters of the C.P.I., after experiencing the process of its degeneration and decay, have once again raised the Inqulab Zindabad flags. There can hardly be any area where the message of revolution was not disseminated in new sections and places.

At certain places, where both the peasant and agricultural labourer organisations co-exist, some healthy trends are emerging. Long-persisting caste prejudices and inhibitions are fast eroding and mutual co-operation is on the rise. Kusa and Himmatpura villages in Moga district, Chak Fateh Singh Wala village in Bathinda district, Singhewala in Muktsar, and Bhutal Kalan of Sangrur district, are the harbingers of this emerging trend. The peasant leaders of one of these villages have dropped a further positive hint: a new thinking is replacing the earlier alarmist peasant attitude on the prospect of revision of land. Heavy indebtedness is surely going to dispossess them of their lands. The Morcha people are correct. The peasants will not only have to fight for

regaining their lost lands but also against further dispossession.

The process of alienation with the ruling class parties among the city poor and the rural labouring classes is catching momentum. The political leaders have betrayed them time and again. That is why they do not take their words at face value. But they are equally restrained, non-committal, and cautious in aligning themselves with some new political force. The innumerable questions put forward by the people everywhere corroborated this observation. But an equally strong urge for struggle is widely prevalent among the people. A highly favourable objective situation is knocking at the doors of the communist revolutionary forces.

The 'Inqulab Zindabad Campaign' has secured an impressive initial response from the toiling sections of Punjab. But there is hardly any place for complacency. The democratic revolutionary forces lag far behind in attaining a position of decisive say in the socio-political life of Punjab. They need to work very hard. Consolidating the gains of the 'Inqulab Zindabad Campaign', the democratic revolutionary forces of Punjab must forge ahead to build a powerful democratic revolutionary movement in Punjab.

Kanpur Textile Workers' Struggle Significance of Victory against Seeming Odds

— by a correspondent

The valiant workers of the textile industry of Kanpur, struggling against the retrenchment of 540 workers of the National Textile Corporation (NTC) mills in Kanpur, have scored a rare and remarkable victory. The NTC Chairman yielded to the persistent and determined 11-month long agitation of the mill workers and conceded the agitation's key demands. In a tripartite meeting held among the NTC chairman, the district administration, and the representatives of Kapda Mill Mazdoor Union (KMMU), the NTC chairman agreed that the 540 contract workers would be regularised as permanent employees of the NTC with retrospective effect (i.e. from the date of the abolition of the contract-labour system in the NTC), that the arrears in all wages would be paid, and that all court cases pending against the workers would be immediately withdrawn. The representatives of the workers, on their part, decided to withdraw the ongoing agitation with immediate effect. The NTC chairman, R.P. Sharma, then and there wrote a letter to the holding company, directing it to clear the wage-arrears of the workers as quickly as possible.

These struggling textile workers of Kanpur were on the war-path since March 1997. From 26th June onwards, they were on an indefinite hunger-strike at the main gate of NTC's main office, braving innumerable hardships. During the biting frosty nights of the winter, when even well-clad people in their woollens hesitated to come out, the 50-60 strong groups of these workers braved chilling winter without even enough clothes or protective cover over their heads. With the meagre donations they collected from other workers and city people,

they bought their daily rations and cooked them at the dharna-site. The rations were always inadequate and they had to go half-hungry. The plight of the workers' families was even worse. With the retrenchment of the workers from the mills and the non-availability of work elsewhere, the moneylenders refused to lend any more and the shopkeepers stopped giving any rations; rather, they insulted and put pressure for clearance of pending amounts.

Describing the horrible plight of the workers' families, Ram Prasad, a worker sitting on the fast-unto-death, said in a choked feeble voice, "Not only me but, back home, my entire family too goes to bed hungry." The condition of a fasting worker named Deen Dayal had deteriorated so much that he had to be shifted to hospital in a grave condition. The doctors attending on him were alarmed at his precarious plight and said that he was sure to die if five bottles of blood were not immediately transfused into him. *Dainik Aaj*, a local daily, reported on 13th November 1997 that out of 540 struggling workers, six workers — viz, Dori Lal and Ashok Kumar (Victoria Mill), Rajeshwar and Ram Karan (Atherton Mill), and Phul Chjand and Om Parkash (Mayur Mill) — had so far died of hunger.

Genesis of the struggle

The public sector enterprise, National Textile Corporation, owns five textile mills in Kanpur — viz, Victoria, Atherton, Mayur, Laxmi Rattan, and Swadeshi. Prior to 1990, the contract-labour system, employing huge numbers of workers, was in vogue in these mills. In April 1990, the U.P. government, through a fakely progressive notification, abolished the contract system and terminated the licences of the contractors. The workers, who were working under those contractors, continued to work in these mills. The NTC started making direct payment to these workers. But on 3rd June, 1996, the N.T.C. management all of a sudden and without any advance intimation or any valid reason sacked 540 workers (including 50 women workers) and debarred them from entering the mill premises. These workers had been working in the same mills for the preceding 20-22 years and had been making regular deductions to the ESI, Provident Fund, and Pension Schemes for workers. In a similar case of another public sector enterprise

— the B.I.C. — the services of its workers had been regularised following the orders of the Governor. Despite these facts, the N.T.C. management remained adamant about not regularising the services of these contract workers.

Later, when these aggrieved workers approached the labour court, the labour commissioner instructed the N.T.C. chairman to restore the status-quo prevailing prior to 3rd June as the dispute fell under rule 4 of the U.P. Industrial Disputes Act 1957, whereby the workers could not be laid off.

When the N.T.C. chairman refused to comply with the labour court orders, the workers approached the district administration for adjudication of the dispute. In a tripartite meeting, the adjudicating A.D.M. after hearing both sides and scrutinising the relevant records gave his verdict in favour of regularising the services of the workers and paying their dues. Even then the chairman refused to budge.

Thus the totally unjustified and adamant attitude of the chairman left no alternative for the workers other than taking to the path of struggle. From then onwards, the workers had been forced to wage a do-or-die struggle.

Inhuman and anti-worker attitude of the management and politicians

All through their long and persistent struggle, the workers approached each and every department and institution concerned with the workers' demands. Although none of them ever openly denied the justness of the workers' demands of reinstatement and regularisation of jobs and payment of wages, yet, on the question of implementation of these demands, their indifference and inhuman and anti-worker attitude was brazen.

Particularly the attitude of N.T.C. chairman R.P. Sharma was the most callous and thoroughly anti-worker. When a correspondent of *Dainik Aaj* in an informal interview with him tried to raise the issue of textile workers with him, he was aggressive: “Don't talk to me about the workers. They have never been the employees of the N.T.C. With the abolition of the contract labour system, the N.T.C. has nothing to do with the contract workers. Now the ball lies entirely in the court

of the Textile Ministry.” He even flatly denied the death of any of the workers at the N.T.C. gate and attributed illness as the cause of the workers deaths, if any.

The chairman's apathy and criminality towards aggrieved workers came across starkly on another occasion too. When the workers holding dharna for over a week gheraoed the chairman over his indifference towards the workers' demands, instead of redressing their grievances or sympathising with them, he summoned the security guards from all the five mills and ordered lathi-charge. More than half a dozen workers sustained injuries. Even their cycles were badly damaged by rampaging security personnel.

So far as the labour department and district administration were concerned, they justified the workers' demands and even impressed upon the chairman the need to concede these demands. But they failed miserably to enforce the labour court's decision and the other adjudication decisions. It was especially noted about the district administration that it acted only at times and only to the extent there was a law and order problem for them. The police refused to register an F.I.R. against the mill security officer for unprovoked and uncalled for brutal lathi-charge. The district administration even failed to send a detailed report on the contract workers' issue to the textile ministry.

As far as the role of the various ruling class politicians is concerned, none of them even bothered to listen to or sympathise with the workers. The struggling workers met the then chief minister Mayawati and narrated their tale of woes. Later, when Kalyan Singh took over as chief minister, they wrote a detailed letter to him. The textile ministry was informed about the workers' genuine demands through various memoranda and letters. Appeals were also sent to the National Human Rights Commission. A workers' delegation led by the union leaders met the visiting parliamentary committee of the Labour and Welfare Ministry. Another parliamentary advisory committee, too, was approached. But all these efforts yielded next to nothing. When India's prime minister I.K. Gujral visited Kanpur, many workers' delegations met him. A delegation of Kapda Mill Mazdoor Union, led by its president, Mona Sur, called upon him and apprised him of the genuineness of the workers' demands and the hardships they were subjected to because of the absurd

defiance of the N.T.C. officials. All ruling class politicians are indeed apologists for imperialism. They are responsible for imposing the imperialist-dictated 'New Economic Policy', the 'Structural Adjustment Programme', 'Globalisation', etc, which are the cause of the retrenchments of workers and the increasing unemployment. So how can any redressal of wounds be expected of them — when they themselves have inflicted these wounds on the people?

Despicable role of trade union bosses

As in other major working class centres, here in Kanpur too, the role and attitude of the leaders of the revisionist/reformist central trade union organisations was utterly deplorable. They are so reconciled to the imperialist-big bourgeois onslaught on the working class, and have bidden good-bye to the path of struggle on class issues, that they now have to take an out-and-out class-collaborationist course. These contract workers, erstwhile members of these organisations, were running from pillar to post to get justice yet none of these leaders ever came forward to help the aggrieved workers. Even worse, they derided spontaneous struggles and struggles under some genuine leadership of the working class, doing what they could to create problems, sow confusion, and sabotage the struggles. When the N.T.C. contract workers had been waging a do-or-die struggle for so many months under the very noses of these leaders and in their full view, instead of solidarity actions on their own initiative or joint platforms, they reacted with total inaction, casting aspersions on the fighting leaders' ips and giving the diversionary slogans of "Delhi Chalo" or "Kranti Raths" parallel to the workers' ongoing struggle. They missed no opportunity to sabotage the struggle. Their entire role and behaviour smacked of narrow trade-unionism and petty rivalry.

Bimal Marhotra, a leader of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha and Cotton Mill Workers Union, seemed to represent all opportunist trade union leaders when, on the one hand, he had to admit that the contract workers being permanent employees of the N.T.C., could not be sacked, but on the other hand, refused to help them on the frivolous plea: "Actually, some people are fighting for the cause of contract workers. I do not intend to interfere in their affairs. If they come to seek my help, I will

fight their battle to the full." Genuine and selfless support can never be construed as interference. Moreover, these contract workers had taken to the path of struggle under the leadership of the Kapda Mill Mazdoor Union only after their erstwhile leaders like Marhotra had failed them. By talking of not interfering in others' affairs, what Marhotra actually meant was that he could support them only if they consented to come under his leadership ditching the ongoing struggle and its leadership. And, in that case, what sort of fight he intended to put up became amply clear from his statement, "Ex-Chief Minister N.D. Tiwari will be joining a programme in the Shikshak Park on 15th November for opening the closed mills."

Another alleged labour leader Mrs. Ananda Sharma seemed to peddle the same approach when she felt satisfied over a requisition sent to the C.M. Kalyan Singh for opening up the closed mills.

The track record of CPI- and CPI(M)-affiliated trade union leaders, who have been portraying themselves as revolutionary representatives of the proletarian class, seemed no different. A legislator of the CPI seemed content when he disclosed to the mediamen that a joint delegation of the CPI and CPI(M) was proceeding to Delhi to forward a demands-charter on working class issues to prime minister I.K. Gujral.

For all these revisionist/reformist charlatans, masquerading as working class leaders, hobnobbing with the ruling class leaders (instead of relying on the militant working class struggles) was the main form of 'fight' for realising the working class demands.

It was indeed this class-collaborationist, sectarian, and utterly impotent approach and politics of these so-called labour leaders which led to the degeneration of the once-powerful working class movement of Kanpur — from its heights of glory to an abyss of inactivity, splits and utter despondency. Commenting on the role and character of such leaders, the president of Kapda Mill Mazdoor Union, Mona Sur, quite justifiably ridiculed their claim of going to Delhi to solve the workers' problems whereas their behaviour in Kanpur itself was totally anti-worker.

Enhancing political and struggle consciousness

One of the outstanding features of this valiant and determined

struggle was the correct political approach and attitude adopted by the struggle-leadership — the Kapda Mill Mazdoor Union led by its president Mona Sur and secretary Vijay Shankar and the Sooti Mill Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee led by its convenor Raj Kumar. The leadership correctly conceived the struggle not as an isolated struggle but as part of the common struggle of the entire workers of N.T.C. and B.I.C. mills of Kanpur. Moreover, they viewed it in the wider context of the overall economic-political situation prevailing in the country. Most important, the leadership seized every opportunity to disseminate this approach and understanding among the rank and file of workers.

The leadership knew full well that the contract workers' struggle was not an isolated issue. All the N.T.C. and B.I.C. textile mills were on the verge of closure and the resultant large-scale retrenchment would hurt wider sections of workers. The disbursement of workers' wages was often delayed by five months or even more. Workers' Provident Fund and Pension Deposits, of some Rs 30 crore, had already been devoured and their right to struggle was going to be curtailed. With this conception of the prevailing situation in mind, Mona Sur asserted vehemently that if the chairman of N.T.C. every thought of crushing the workers' struggle, conceiving it as a single spark, he must never forget that a single spark can start a prairie fire and the textile mills of Kanpur itself were like a dry jungle ready to light up.

The leadership also knew it full well that the roots of mill closures and retrenchments lay in the intense pressure and policies of the I.M.F. and the World Bank, and that the new economic policy, the new industrial policy and the new textile policy were the result and instrument of that pressure and policies. That is why Raj Kumar, the convenor of the Sooti Mill Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee, asserted that the ruling classes were bent upon enslaving the country to the imperialists and that the thrusting of workers into the jaws of hunger was just a part of the conspiracy. That is why he resoundingly proclaimed that the issue was not merely the reinstatement of 540 workers but that of burying the new economic policy, the new industrial policy, and the new textile policy.

The leadership also knew full well that none of the ruling class parties, being culprits who support the new economic policy and the

new industrial policy would dare jump into the struggle fray. That is why Vijay Shankar, the secretary of Kapda Mill Mazdoor Union, vigorously asserted that only workers' unity could put a stop to the mill closures and ensure a square meal to the workers. Whether the workers belonged to the N.T.C. or the B.I.C., whether they were casual or permanent, all of them need to fight unitedly. The workers were required to launch a formidable struggle, based on joint activity and common politics, to foil the heinous conspiracy of mill closures. If the workers could organise and mobilise themselves on a massive scale and launch a struggle, no force on earth could vanquish them.

On the practical plane, the leadership emphasised the dissemination of political and struggle consciousness among the ordinary workers on a massive scale and to the maximum. Through innumerable gatherings organised throughout the entire course of the 11-month-long agitation (in which, though the traditional trade union leaders never participated, yet the workers and activists of N.T.C. and B.I.C. mills and leaders of the smaller unions enthusiastically participated), through meetings and processions organised in other factories, and through individual encounters with the workers this consciousness was disseminated on a big scale. As a result, the struggle-leadership not only succeeded in persevering in the struggle despite the highly adverse situation but also in inculcating the spirit (and significance) of carrying on the struggle "relying on the organised strength of the workers rather than relying on the power of the leaders". Notwithstanding the criminal indifference, diversionary and divisive policies, and disguised and not-so-disguised acts of sabotage on the part of so-called established trade union leaderships, the Kapda Mill Mazdoor Union leadership succeeded in mounting persistent and increasing pressure on the chairman and district officials as well as in shattering the earlier atmosphere of widely prevalent disillusionment, despondency and inactivity. It thus laid the basis for the development of a promising working class movement.

Significance of the struggle

Given the political situation and the state of the working class movement prevailing in India, the preliminary victory, and more importantly the fact that the textile workers struggled against retrenchment, are immensely significant in many a respect.

First, India has been subjected to an all-round imperialist onslaught. The major imperialist institutions, especially the trio of the I.M.F., the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation, are twisting the arms of the Indian compradors, to take such internal policy measures as facilitate the imperialists' plunder of India's natural resources, its cheap labour, its vast market, and its premier enterprises and institutions. The new economic policy and its various concomitants are the result of this arm-twisting. The imperialist onslaught is especially severe on the working class. Wholesale retrenchments through mill closures and lay-offs; depression of wages to unprecedented levels; deteriorating working and living conditions; curtailment of trade union rights, especially the right to organise, struggle and do collective bargaining; rising job and after-job insecurity; deindustrialisation of the country; and tightening imperialist stranglehold over the lives of the people and the country are some of the bitter fruits of this onslaught. The lackey Indian ruling classes are hand-in-glove with their imperialist masters in this onslaught directed against the toiling people of India. The stranglehold of revisionist/reformist leaderships over the Indian working class movement, and the general debility of the Indian democratic revolutionary movement, gave rise to a situation in which the imperialist onslaught could proceed more or less without any serious and formidable challenge. In such a situation, the resolute and prolonged struggle waged by the contract workers of Kanpur's textile mills and such other struggles help in building a challenge to the imperialist onslaught. However weak that challenge may seem at present, such struggles are of immense significance in that they can be the harbingers of wider opposition to the imperialist plunder of the country and can even catalyse the process of growing opposition. Moreover, the preliminary victory achieved in this struggle is significant as it goes to prove that this imperialist onslaught in the form of the new economic policy *can* be beaten back and reversed *provided a dogged and formidable struggle is waged with a clear revolutionary perspective and orientation.*

Secondly, the long spell of the continual domination of the pernicious revisionist/reforming ideology and politics has done a colossal damage to the revolutionary working class movement of India.

It has sapped the vitality of the organised working class movement and thrust it into a state of acute immobilisation and paralysis. The rank opportunist, class-collaborationist, divisive, diversionary and sectarian policies of these revisionist/reformist trade union bureaucrats have gravely harmed the fighting potential of the organised working class movement, thus lending a helping hand to the comprador Indian ruling classes and their imperialist masters to carry out their unhindered assault on the working class and other toiling people of India. As a result, an atmosphere of utter helplessness, disillusionment, despondency, faithlessness, mutual bickerings and paralysis prevails in the face of the accentuated attacks by the foreign and comprador capital on the lives of the working classes. The trade union bosses of the established major trade union organisations have reconciled themselves to the ongoing processes of liberalisation, 'modernisation', exit-policy, etc. Their only role is in counselling the rulers on how best to carry out these reforms. The workers, at large, feel completely ditched and betrayed. In such a situation, sporadic struggles such as waged by the Kanpur textile workers can go a long way to change for the better the prevalent gloomy atmosphere, and to provide an alternative to the discredited leaderships and organisations — an alternative of class unity and class struggle. Under the inspiring impact of the heroic struggle of the contract workers of textile mills of Kanpur a new positive trend — of rejecting and rebelling against the established erstwhile leaderships and struggling on workers' own strength — is quite discernible and is gaining momentum. Overruling and rejecting the discredited leaders, a formidable and effective jamming up of the railway tracks by 1,500 workers of the B.I.C. textile factories and a 21-hour successful road-block at Zirak Post against the closure of Elgin Mill by the enraged workers are glorious examples of militant mass actions organised by the revolutionary working class. Victory or no victory, this trend of taking to militant mass actions by the working class is the most positive and welcome development. It aptly brings out the immense significance of the Kanpur workers struggle.

Lastly, the ordeal the contract textile workers of Kanpur went through during their 11-month long determined and prolonged struggle, brings forth the immense stamina, fighting will and potential, class hatred in the working class and most of all, the struggle potential latent in the

prevailing objective situation. The intensified all-round assault on the working class has pushed it to the wall leaving before it no alternative other than to fight with all its might. It was the compulsions of this objective situation and the urge to fight for survival which coupled with class-consciousness enabled the workers of Kanpur to persevere in struggle and brave all hardships — hunger, cold, repeated brutal lathi-charges, paucity of material resources, threats, etc. The correct line and leadership also placed its role. This situation is not peculiar to Kanpur. It is prevailing everywhere. The resounding message of the Kanpur workers' struggle is: "Dare to fight, dare to win". Revolutionary forces should come out boldly, seize the initiative, organise and mobilise the workers for struggle; there can never be dearth of response from the workers. The Kanpur workers' experience shows that a small force can sustain in struggle and in due course grow into a big force. This can go a long way in changing the complexion of the Indian working class movement.

Report from West Bengal

The Coherence among the Positive Movements Is on the Rise and the 'Lull' in the State Is on the Wane

— by a correspondent

West Bengal, once considered a cradle of democratic and revolutionary movements by revolutionaries all over India, lost that reputation in the last two decades of 'Left Front' rule. In these decades, West Bengal has not seen any such broad-based mass political movement encompassing workers, peasants, students, youths, women, intelligentsia and others, as were very much prevalent in West Bengal upto the early 1970s. On the other hand, the mainstay of movements under the leadership of CPI(M) and the 'Left Front' in these decades had been the path of parliamentary cretinism. So, West Bengal has now achieved the ruling class 'glory' of becoming a very peaceful and calm state. This lull in West Bengal is considered so important by different sections of the ruling classes, that they paid their tribute to Mr Jyoti Basu, the chief architect of this lull, by vocally supporting him for the post of Prime Minister, after the parliamentary elections of 1996.

But, for the last few years, a change has also become more and more evident in this state. Discontent of people from different corners and sections, especially of the workers and employees, was being expressed through different movements. These movements have been, in the main, getting the support of the majority of the workers and employees in their particular areas of work and stay. Moreover, these movements are not in the orbit of parliamentary cretinism but are being led by communist revolutionaries directly or indirectly. However,

these movements had remained mainly discrete. It is here that presently some changes are being seen. Some possibilities of co-ordination are now developing inside these movements.

To get a more-or-less objective assessment of the direction of this change we are to study these movements of the workers and employees and the possibilities therein. No doubt, in judging the possibilities, the overall context of the political condition of West Bengal has also to be kept in mind.

First of all, let us give a brief account of the recent movements of the workers and employees which are brewing with new possibilities. After that we will try to point out political characteristics of these movements and the possibilities therein.

A brief account of some recent positive movements

The following brief account does not include all the positive movements of West Bengal. Here placed are only a few. But these movements are the movements of the workers and employees, and besides some sort of co-ordination or mutual help is being sought amongst these movements.

(i) Bengal Ingot and Poddar Project.

Bengal Ingot belongs to the Thapar group, which is one of the big industrial houses of India. The management of Bengal Ingot closed down the factory on 9th February 1997 without any prior intimation and illegally. After the closure, the management tried to give some excuse such as non-cooperation of the workers and employees, resistance by them in production, etc. But the fact is that the management itself made Bengal Ingot sick with the definite design of sizeably reducing the number of workers and employees. They expected that, with the closure, the starving workers would have no other way but to surrender to the management, voluntarily accept the management's so-called 'retirement benefits', and leave the factory in large numbers. In this plan, the management was in connivance with the government and the established trade union leaders belonging to CITU and INTUC.

But, of the 400-odd workers and employees only a section was

connected with CITU and INTUC. Most of the workers and employees belonged to the union named 'Supervisory Staff Association'.

This union from the very beginning tried to organise a united front of all the workers of all the unions there against the employer. The union leaders of CITU and INTUC, under pressure from the workers, paid lip-service to the united movement. But at the same time, in league with the management, they left no stone unturned to break the morale of the struggling workers. Nevertheless through strenuous efforts of the leaders of Supervisory Staff Association and through their own practical experience the workers came to realise who were their friends and who were enemies. Ultimately, the workers belonging to CITU and INTUC too are joining in more and more numbers the struggle for opening the mill.

Another development in the course of this struggle helped this movement. Poddar Project, a cotton mill situated near Bengal Ingot, was also closed down. The number of workers of this factory is about 1,200. Here also the unions belonging to CITU and INTUC did nothing to open the mill. When the factory was closed down some seven or eight months ago, the workers of this factory decided to proceed towards the path of struggle under the leadership of 'Poddar Project Sangrami Sramik Union' from November 1997.

Through a process, the struggle of these two factories became close and they started campaigning jointly. Jointly, they conveyed their message of struggle to the surrounding population which is overwhelmingly of workers and toiling masses. Moreover, this is one of the important working class zones of West Bengal. And many factories in this zone are remaining closed. But there was no such significant movement to open them. Consequently the joint struggle gave a relevant message to the local population of working people to resist.

In December, a joint struggling committee was formed. In the meantime, a group of volunteers was formed in each of these factories comprising active organisers to continue the movement uninterruptedly. The active organisers have been collecting money from the people for continuing the struggle. This effort is being considered an inseparable part of the movement which has now attracted the attention of the local population. As the so-called established political parties and their stooge

union leaders are not doing anything to open these factories the workers have given up on these leaders.

Till now, the government is inactive and the management is adamant. But the workers of these factories are also determined to advance further and raise the movement to a higher level against both employers and government. For this, recently the struggling workers of both factories decided to organise a rail roko in the first half of May and prepare towards that.

The workers are expecting that this programme will arouse the local population and make the government take some steps on the issue. The workers, on the basis of the outcome of this rail roko, are determined to proceed further.

(ii) Paharpur Cooling Towers

The struggle of the factory which attracted the attention of the struggling masses of Calcutta and its suburbs most in 1997 was Paharpur Cooling Towers.

The owner of this factory is Gourav Swarup, who is the ex-chairman of the Indian Chamber of Commerce. Paharpur Cooling Towers has eight factories in all. Of these, six are in New Delhi and of the remaining two, one is at Garden Reach, Calcutta, and the other at Vasa in South 24 Parganas adjacent to Calcutta. In the Garden Reach factory, there are about 300 workers. All of them are permanent. And of the 281 workers at the Vasa factory, about 200 are temporary. The daily wage of these temporary workers is about Rs 24 to 30 only.

The workers organised themselves in the union 'Paharpur Cooling Towers Workers' Union' to launch their struggle against their owner. They did not want to remain under the umbrella of CTIU, INTUC, etc. This made the owner Gaurav Swarup angry. He retrenched 200 temporary workers of Vasa factory on 12th May 1997 and also sacked 10 union leaders. The workers were not ready to accept this. They organised a strike. The important point to be noted here is that the permanent workers of Vasa factory organised the strike against the retrenchment of the temporary workers. On the 15th day of the strike, about 100 outsiders were brought into the Vasa factory to break the strike: this was done with the direct help of the administration.

The workers of Garden Reach factory raised their voice against this brutal attack by the management and the administration on their fellow workers of Vasa and they also waged a strike in their own factory against these atrocities. So, on 3rd June, 1997, about 900 police rushed upon the workers of the Garden Reach factory at midnight and forcibly took away different finished products, unfinished materials, as well as machines from this factory; a lock-out notice was hung up in front of the factory gate.

Workers and employees of different factories unhesitatingly raised their voice against this brutal attack by the owner and the government on the lawful and peaceful movement. Different organisations joined forces and several protest meetings were organised in Calcutta. These meetings were successful. After that a huge protest rally was organised on behalf of the organisations which stood jointly in support of the struggling workers of Paharpur Cooling Towers. From the rally a deputation was sent to the government.

After the events and seeing the indomitable spirit of the workers, the owners and the government had to submit to the demands of the workers. On 2nd January, 1998, an agreement was signed; the lockout at Garden Reach, Calcutta, was withdrawn and the workers of Vasa factory joined their work.

(iii) Bouria Cotton Mill

This mill was once one of the important cotton mills of West Bengal. It is situated in Howrah district. There were at one time about 6,000 workers working in the mill. But squabbles among the owners and their greed for profit at any cost made the mill sick and the number of workers began to be reduced. Now there are only 600 workers there. A promoter, C.S. Jain, has managed to become the owner, through the workings of the B.I.F.R. But it is said that the real owner is Govind Sarda, one of the most notorious owners of West Bengal's jute industry.

C.S. Jain also proceeded to reduce the number of workers to 500. A lockout was declared on 18th March, 1995. From that time on the workers carried on the movement to get the lockout withdrawn. They fought under the leadership of the Sangrami Sramik Union of Bouria Cotton Mill. They are still struggling against the indifference of the government

and the overall anti-working class actions of the owner.

The workers have no other alternative but to get the mill opened. So they can be determined in their struggle. They also will not allow the owner to open the mill with black conditions, as had happened in this mill on various earlier occasions. A signature campaign to open the mill was organised, and about one lakh people signed. This was submitted to the Chief Minister. Various processions and mass meetings too were organised at Bouria and also in Calcutta in favour of this demand. The workers have also taken recourse to various forms of protest, such as hunger strike, rasta roko, rail roko, etc. Still they have not achieved their demands.

Just before the parliamentary elections, they organised an 'election programme' to gather support in the locality to the movement to open the mill. This 'election' which was held on 15th and 16th February 1998, attracted the attention of the local people. The polling in favour of this movement was more than 50 per cent of the local poll. This action attracted the attention of not only the local people, but also of the politically conscious intelligentsia and workers of West Bengal.

(iv) Calcutta University

Calcutta University was once one of the most prestigious organisations of West Bengal. The authorities of Calcutta University had to maintain some democratic values because of the political consciousness in the university.

Now, under the rule of the 'Left Front' government, gross violation of democratic norms is rampant.

Barin Bhattacharya was an employee of this university. He is also the president of the employees' union, named 'Karmachari Aikya Kendra' (Employees' Unity Centre). And he is a member of the senate, elected by the employees.

Bhattacharya's 'crime' was that; after becoming the member of the senate, he produced some definite evidence of the corruption prevalent in the university, in a meeting. Anil Biswas, one of the topmost leaders of CPI(M)'s West Bengal State Committee and the party person controlling the affairs of the university, was present in that meeting. Biswas threatened Bhattacharya with termination of his services. After

that the union published a leaflet on the issue. Bhattacharya's service was terminated. The excuse was that in the leaflet some 'indecent' words were used. But the authorities could not mention any violation of service conditions.

This sort of blunt attack on the right of expression by the authorities of Calcutta University infuriated a large section of the intelligentsia and democratic-minded people. Many lecturers, teachers, notable citizens, and also many struggling organisations raised their voice against this attack and a convention was held on 20th November, 1997 with the demand that this termination be withdrawn and an enquiry conducted into the charge of corruption in the university. On 6th January 1998, a rally was organised on the university lawn itself, condemning this act of the authorities. Then a sit-in demonstration was organised at the university gate.

Till now the movement has not achieved its demand. The prestige of the CPI(M) party and the democratic right of an employee are thus confronting each other. From this confrontation a bigger movement is in the offing.

(v) Hosiery Industry

The number of workers in this industry is anything between one to four lakh. But the workers' livelihood keeps them in severe poverty and very disgraceful conditions. This is a 'developing' industry. The number of workers is increasing as also are the profits of the owners.

Most of the workers are not organised into any union. They are very much scattered and work in innumerable small factories. Their numbers vary from five to ten in many factories. So, in putting their demand before the owners the workers are not at all strong enough.

However, this industry comes under the jurisdiction of the Minimum Wages Act. According to this Act, wage revision is needed every five years. But the last wage revision for the workers was more than 10 years ago. The government did not take a single step to correct this, though various movements of workers sought to put pressure on the government. Prices of essential commodities have been increasing rapidly and in the last 10 years these have increased several fold. yet the government has been keeping mum.

In such conditions, the struggling organisations of hosiery workers — 'Hosiery Working Men's Union' and 'Body-cutter Samitee of West Bengal' — took the initiative to pressurise the owners before the last Puja festival. The demand was that until the government took any decision regarding the minimum wage, the owners would have to increase their wage by Rs 300 as an interim measure. After the government declares the minimum wage, this interim increment would be adjusted. A few owners accepted this demand. Some asked instead for police protection. Then, due to the arrival of the Puja festival, the intensity of the movement partially subsided.

Though this movement too did not achieve its demands everywhere, it did make an impact on the minds of a large section of hosiery workers. So the workers pressurised the unions of CITU and AITUC to come to terms with the aforesaid unions. Under this pressure, the leadership of CITU and AITUC talked to the leaders of these unions. Now preparation is going on for a bigger movement.

(vi) Hind Wire factory

Hind Wire factory is situated in Barrackpur sub-division of North 24 Parganas. Its owner is Ashok Rungta. He closed the mill on 27th November, 1996, without paying any attention to rules and regulations. Of the about 230 workers in this factory three have already died out of starvation, and most of the workers are now starving.

But the workers took to the path of struggle. There were two unions in this factory. The union of INTUC was actually a paper-union. But the CITU union had the support of most of the workers. Neither union did anything, however, after the closure of the mill. So the workers organised their own union, under the banner of the 'Mazdoor Manch' of Khardah-Titagarh.

The workers raised the slogan of immediate opening of the mill. This demand was sent to the owner as also to the labour department of the West Bengal government. No response came from both of them. In the mean time, the owner took the case of the factory to the BIFR, showing the factory to be sick.

The workers started sitting at the gate from 1st January, 1998. And an intensive campaign is going on in the locality upholding this

movement to open the factory and criticising the role of the government.

The remarkable point is that more and more workers are joining this movement, leaving their previous leaderships of CITU and INTUC. Moreover, the movement is now getting the support of the workers of different factories in the locality and of the local people too. Still, the owner and government are silent.

Currently, the workers are preparing for a more broad and intensive movement, such as rail roko, rasta roko, hunger strike, etc.

(vii) India Jute Mill

India Jute Mill is situated at Srirampore of Hooghly district. In this mill, in December 1997, elections were held for the P.F. Trustee Board and the Works Committee. While all the established trade unions such as CITU, INTUC, AITUC etc participated in the elections, the candidates of IFTU secured about 70 per cent of the votes and actually won all the 12 seats.

The workers' union under the leadership of IFTU came into being in July 1996. At this time, the management introduced 18 shifts instead of 21 shifts per week. By this action of the management the service of budlee or casual workers became uncertain. The permanent workers under the leadership of IFTU started a movement to re-introduce 21 shifts. The workers rejected the proposal of overtime, first of all in the finishing department and then in the powerloom section. Then they gheraoed the management. The management retaliated by declaring lockout on 9th November 1996. The factory remained closed for about four months. It was opened on 4th March 1997 and the management had to re-introduce 21 shifts.

As the workers were coming under the influence of this union, the established trade union leaders began to terrorise the workers in many ways. On 4th May 1997, a notorious leader of CITU was murdered. The CITU leadership blamed the leadership of IFTU for this and attacked the union office and put it on fire. But the workers remained firm. After this, the union demanded elections of the P.F. Trustee Board and the Works' Committee as no election had been held in the preceding 12 years. From June, deputations to the management and P.F. offices began and these deputations continued upto November. The deputations were

organised more than five times. Thereafter the date for election was declared.

Vigorous activities were organised in the factory by means of the departmental committees which had come into being previously. At the gate meeting and rally of 13th December about 2,000 workers participated. Election was held on 19th December. About 300 volunteers of this factory and also from other factories played an active role from morning till night, to protect the workers from the attack of the local goons connected with the ruling class parties. At about 10 p.m. the results were declared; about 1,000 participated in the procession at that time in the severe cold of December.

This incident may be considered as an indication of the developing trend in the workers' movement in Hooghly district.

(viii) Heroic struggle of the hawkers of Calcutta

The hawkers of Calcutta have been struggling for about 16 months under the leadership of 'Hawker Sangram Committee'. This movement can be cited as an exemplary one in the existing conditions of West Bengal.

On 24th November, 1996, with the direction of 'Left'-Front government and under the guidance of Calcutta Municipal Corporation, the eviction of hawkers started in the dead of night.

The operation was named 'Operation Sunshine' by the authorities and was carried out jointly by the police, the RAF, the ruling party cadres, and anti-social elements. With the blessing of Subhas Chakraborty, widely considered a man of action and all-powerful, these forces, with the help of pay-loaders, bull-dozers, etc crushed the minimum means of sustenance of these persons. Most of the hawkers are either refugees from East Pakistan or retrenched workers or unemployed youth. They have been sustaining themselves and their families on their own, and providing materials at much cheaper rates to the poor and the lower middle-class sections of the population.

By Operation Sunshine, thousands of hawkers and their families were driven into the darkness of uncertainty. The government did not take any responsibility for rehabilitating the hawkers. In that period, 18 hawkers died out of starvation and four of them committed suicide.

This kind of inhuman torture and assault on the property and life of common people is unprecedented in the history of Calcutta.

The authorities tried to convince people that their intention was only to make the city clean and to make the passage of traffic smoother. But the real reason was the wish to please the World Bank. Another factor was the scheduled visit of John Major, the then prime minister of Britain.

At first, the people were fooled to some extent by the vigorous campaign of the mass media. But slowly they came to realise the real design of the authority and also the loss to themselves of cheaper materials from the hawkers. So they began to stand by the struggling hawkers more and more.

The 'Hawker Sangram Committee' came out as the only real struggling force through the movement. In it were 36 unions belonging to different political shades. CITU, under the leadership of CPI(M), did not join the Hawker Sangram Committee. But a considerable section of CITU stood against the atrocities by the government. CITU waged a struggle in favour of rehabilitating the hawkers with three other unions — UTUC, AITUC, and AICCTU. The role of AICCTU was very dubious. It was under CITU's leadership and was also under 'Hawker Sangram Committee'.

The government went on neglecting the 'Hawker Sangram Committee' and did not allow them to participate in negotiations. With the help of the unions under the leadership of CITU, government and the Calcutta Municipal Corporation organised a few 'hawker-fairs' in some places of the city to divide the struggling hawkers. Their intention was to buy over a few of the struggling hawkers and sideline the others. But Hawker Sangram Committee boycotted these fairs and decided to continue their struggle until all the hawkers got rehabilitation through a process. Hawker-fairs turned out to be a farce.

With strenuous efforts the Hawker Sangram Committee emerged as the main force of the hawkers. After some time, many of the hawkers who were previously under the banner of CITU came out and started joining the Sangram Committee. The hawkers under the leadership of Hawker Sangram Committee began to hawk their materials in different corners of the city again. Of course, the previous permanent structures

of the hawkers' stalls by the side of the important roads were no longer there: they had been shattered. However, as the common people started to purchase goods from the returned hawkers, the movement of the hawkers could also move on. At the time of the Puja festival, the authorities were compelled to accept the demand of the hawkers that they be allowed to hawk their materials even on some of the important roads.

At last, the government had to climb down and sit with the representatives of Hawker Sangram Committee. It needs mention that CPI(M) party's Calcutta district committee too became divided on the issue of Operation Sunshine. Further, the government had formally to accept the responsibility of rehabilitating all the hawkers and had to accept different proposals of the Hawker Sangram Committee.

It is politically significant that, on 9th January, 1998, the hawkers under the leadership of Hawker Sangram Committee organised a protest rally in front of the American Centre and the British Consulate to commemorate the completion of one year since the arrival of John Major (the then British prime minister) to Calcutta, in whose honour the Operation Sunshine had been timed.

The hawkers' struggle is now on the verge of victory. They are slowly but steadily getting rehabilitated and most of them have regained their previous places of business activity.

This movement is an example of a heroic struggle by a backward section of the people. And it is also an example of how the common people get politicised through practical struggle.

Important, too, is the fact that in their struggle various mass organisations, mass political organisations, and individuals played a significant supportive role. These forces jointly created an atmosphere of unity and cooperation which had an impact on the people and on the authorities too. Moreover, the squabbles and rivalries among various sections of the CPI(M) helped the struggle to proceed towards victory.

(ix) Protest against the mass-murder in Jehanabad

On 1st December 1997, the landlords' notorious Ranveer Sena, organised with the assistance mainly of BJP and other ruling class parties, brutally killed about 60 peasants of a village named Laxmanpur

Bathe of Jehanabad district of Bihar. It was a devilish attack on the landless and poor peasants. Voices were raised against this barbarous act from all parts of the country. The reaction was such that even some parliamentary political parties had to protest against this massacre.

A fact-finding team was sent on behalf of the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) from West Bengal and they submitted a report. A remarkable thing followed. Different struggling organisations led by different revolutionary organisations of various trends participated in a joint programme against the killings. A leaflet was issued on behalf of 25 mass organisations and mass political organisations. These organisations assembled at College Square, near Calcutta University, on 24th December. A big procession of four to five thousand participants reached Dharamtallah, covering some kilometres on foot. Workers, peasants and other toiling masses were the main participants in this programme. A mass meeting was held at Dharamtallah and a deputation was sent to the governor asking him to deliver the protest letter to the President.

This demonstration was an important event for all the constituents. In recent times, no such big joint rally had been organised by the communist revolutionary forces.

Characteristics of these movements

It is to be clearly stated that these are not the only movements, showing positive characteristics, of the workers and employees of West Bengal. But the movements described above have got some special features and it is for these features that they have been depicted here.

Let us briefly note the most important characteristics:

(i) Mostly, these movements in their particular sphere either already have achieved the support of the majority of workers and employees or have been earning more and more support and are in the process of becoming a movement of the majority. So these movements are becoming the real workers' and employees' movements against the employers. They are thus becoming antidotes to the so-called workers' movements led by the parliamentary parties which actually divide the workers and employees under the leaderships of their respective stooge trade unions.

(ii) These movements are clearly directed against both employers

and the government. That is, these movements are in the main free from the illusions about any positive role by the government.

(iii) These movements have the potential of developing outside the orbit of parliamentary cretinism, since the organisers of these movements are in the main, directly or indirectly, influenced by various communist revolutionary organisations.

(iv) The leaderships of these movements try to achieve cohesion and co-ordination amongst themselves at the mass level notwithstanding differences in political line and thinking amongst them. At the same time, some ground for united action in the future is also being achieved. This effort reflects the feeling in the rank and file and the workers and employees that unless a cohesion amongst these movements develops, nothing palpable can be achieved as an alternative to the present parliamentary politics which is on its own too tottering. Moreover, the insistence on making a breakthrough by a single organisation's efforts is losing ground to the idea that joint activities among the constituents of these movements can achieve results for all.

(v) In all the movements mentioned above, 'Sramik Karmachari Sangrami Yukta Mancha' (United Platform for Struggling Workers and Employees), which came into being in March 1997, played an important role in providing an atmosphere of co-ordination and cohesion. A section of these movements is led by the constituents of the Mancha, some are not. But the Mancha has played the role of an important link for getting support from others for a particular movement. In these activities, the positive approach of the Mancha has been appreciated.

Possibilities

The workers, peasants and other toiling masses of West Bengal being fed up with the activities of the CPI(M) and 'Left' Front rule, are in search of an alternative, for a long time now. From the experience of the movements, too, it is clear that wherever struggling people find a more-or-less reliable alternative they resort and assemble under that alternative force. But these alternatives which have been developing in West Bengal are still in the main very limited and discrete in

character. An alternative revolutionary political force as such, in the political arena of West Bengal, is yet to emerge.

In such a time, with no alternative revolutionary political force visible, when the 'alternative' of Trinamul Congress-BJP combine came out at the time of the Lok Sabha elections with the glamour of something 'new' in West Bengal, people began to take sides with them. A large section of CPI(M) cadres too worked clandestinely for the Trinamul-BJP and against the CPI(M) itself.

From the results of the last parliamentary elections, it became clear that CPI(M)'s hold over the politics of West Bengal is deteriorating and the Trinamul Congress-BJP have come out stronger and will so develop for some more time to come.

So, to gain further ground, different types of movements under them and also party-clashes between these two parties on the one hand and mainly CPI(M) on the other are going to flare up in the near future in different areas and different spheres. Particularly, given the miserable condition of West Bengal (the sharp price-hikes, the closure of thousands of factories, the huge number of unemployed youths) this is inevitable. The lull in West Bengal, about which the CPI(M) party-bosses have been boasting as 'peaceful times', is going to be more and more broken and unrest is going to become more pronounced in every sphere of the society.

In this turbulent atmosphere and amidst the decline of CPI(M) some new possibilities come to the fore:

(i) Congress and CPI(M) will have to come closer. This is also becoming evident more and more from the all-India politics. In the name of combating Trinamul and BJP, Congress and CPI(M) leadership would take that recourse.

(ii) But this will inevitably help in breaking the CPI(M) itself, which is already deeply divided into various factions. Some factions will definitely not join hands with their arch-enemy, the Congress. Some may even quit the party. Some may resign from politics.

(iii) As the mood of the common masses is anti-CPI(M) and anti-establishment, so there could be some development of the Trinamul and BJP in the immediate future. But as these parties are no less pro-

establishment than CPI(M), so in a short time the illusion which might have developed about these two parties will start eroding.

(iv) There is the possibility of a section of CPI(M) membership coming out of that party and joining the revolutionary movement.(v) The scope of the communist revolutionaries to work amongst the people is going to increase greatly. The politics of CPI(M) has been decaying for a long time, but now its organisational might is on the decline. On the decline also is the fear-psychosis of the masses regarding CPI(M).

At this juncture how far the communist revolutionary forces will be able to utilise this favourable condition would depend much on whether they rise to the occasion and emerge as a true and revolutionary alternative. For this, they will have to enhance the process of unflinchingly and clearly standing unitedly for the people's cause and taking the path of stubborn struggle and sacrifice.

28/3/98

Our Legacy **The Battle of Madrid**

— by a correspondent

We present another in the series of articles about 'Our Legacy', the glorious historical record of the Communists throughout the world. The following is the second instalment in our brief account of the Spanish Communists in the Spanish civil war (1936-39). The first instalment appeared in the last issue of Comrade.

Franco's armies drove relentlessly towards Madrid, aided by the incompetence and non-seriousness of the Socialist-led government and the militias' lack of weapons, discipline and coordination. By the start of November the fascist troops had reached the outskirts of the city. Even so the government refused to dig trenches and anti-tank ditches, on the strange argument that to fight in such a fashion was unmanly and unmilitary!

The Communists nevertheless mobilised the people to do so, their most prominent mass leaders showing the way with picks and shovels. As the German writer Ludwig Renn (an International Brigades member) wrote in the Spanish Communist paper: "The soldier in a trench need not fear enemy aeroplanes or cavalry. A tank can hardly harm you if you're in a trench. It is not cowardly to throw yourself on the ground in the heat of battle. A good soldier must guard his life well, since only live men can continue fighting."

Throughout October the Communists were hectically organising the defence of the city. The Party instructed its members: "To the front lines to defend Madrid! We, more than anyone else, comrades, are duty-bound to be the first in every effort and sacrifice..." It urged the nation: