

30 YEARS OF JAN 19, 1982 GENERAL STRIKE

Remembering a Saga of Worker-Peasant Unity

A.K. Padmanabhan

THE coming January 19 will mark the 30th anniversary of the day that witnessed one of the most glorious episodes in the history of militant struggles in independent India, when urban and rural workers joined together in a day's strike all over the country. That was the first countrywide general strike and bandh in independent India.

Though the call for this general strike was given by the National Campaign Committee of central trade union organisations and national federations, the charter of demands included demands like minimum wages for agricultural workers, a comprehensive legislation for agricultural workers and remunerative prices for the peasants' produce.

Sadly, even after 30 years, these demands of the rural workers and peasants have not yet materialised. It is also a well known that the working people and the trade unions are still continuing their struggle over the demands like minimum wages, implementation of labour laws etc.

Also, the demands related to price rise, public distribution and the like continue to be on the charter, as the various governments at the centre and in most of the states during the last 30 years have not cared to meet the basic demands of the toiling masses in India.

WORKER-PEASANT ALLIANCE: AN EXAMPLE

The most important achievement of the general strike of January 19, 1982, which eventually turned into a veritable Bharat bandh, was the unity of workers and peasants in the arena of struggle.

A joint statement issued at that time by the opposition parties on the general strike noted:

“We are happy to know that the working class has raised the issue of remunerative prices for the peasants, decent wages for agricultural workers and supply of food and other essential commodities at reasonable prices to the people.”

This statement cum appeal was signed by the Democratic Socialist Party, RSP, Forward Bloc, CPI, Janata Party, BJP, Bharatiya Lok Dal and CPI(M), among others.

Noting the huge response to the strike on January 19, late Comrade BTR had noted at the time:

“.....by combining the demands of the working class with the pressing needs of the peasantry and the agricultural workers, the trade unions took initiative to unite all sections of people who are facing a miserable existence under bourgeois landlord rule.”

He further said:

“.....this consciousness has to be carried forward..... the process of trade unions coming out as champions of the peasantry and the agricultural workers has to be carried forward.”

The martyrdom of ten comrades in different parts of the country in the brutal repressions unleashed by the governments of the day roused anger and also the feelings of solidarity with the rural workers. Many of those killed were poor agricultural workers who had come out on the streets in solidarity with their working class brethren.

At that time, led by late M G Ramachandran, the then AIADMK government in Tamilnadu had let loose a veritable reign of terror --- days before the strike took place. Thousands were arrested and imprisoned at the time in the state. On the day of the strike, three agricultural workers were killed in Nagapattinam district – Anjan, Nagooran and Gnanasekaran.

SOLIDARITY FUND

The immediate reaction from the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and its affiliated unions was that they began collecting a fund to help the families of the three martyrs. A Martyrs Column was also built in the village Thirumeignanam.

A few months after this general strike, the CITU organised its state conference in the working class centre of Coimbatore, which seriously discussed the issue of worker-peasant unity in struggles. Though the trade unions have their own weaknesses and difficulties, the general feeling of the delegates to that conference was that some serious efforts needed to be made to build up a strong movement of agricultural workers. The presence of Comrade B T Ranadive in the conference and his call to build up worker-peasant unity also prompted the conference delegates to dwell upon the issue seriously and in detail.

The clarion call of the conference was that every CITU member in the state would contribute a token amount of one rupee per year towards the Kisan Solidarity Fund. It was decided that this fund would be handed over to the Agricultural Workers Union every year on January 19.

It was also decided that January 19 would henceforth be observed by the CITU all over the state as Martyrs Day, pay tributes to all the martyrs of the democratic movement in the state.

The Tamilnadu state committee of the CITU continues to collect this solidarity fund of Re one from each member every year and hand over the amount collected to the Agricultural Workers Union for the cause of building up a strong movement. Though a small effort in the context of the gigantic dimensions of the task ahead, this is surely something worth emulating. In the first year, an amount of Rs 40,000 was thus collected, and last year it reached up to Rs 3.5 lakh.

Today, the distress of not only the agricultural workers and poor peasants but of the rural working masses as a whole has increased manifold. Suicides by the distressed peasants in many parts of the country have brought out the utter failure of the various bourgeois landlord governments at the centre and in the states; rather of the entire bourgeois landlord system itself.

As the CITU views it, it is the responsibility of the leadership of trade union organisations and of the peasant and agricultural movement in the country, to move ahead with a concerted programme of action in order to unify the toiling masses.

The historic strike 30 years ago and the martyrdom of several urban and rural workers on January 19, 1982, once again reminds us of the tasks ahead. The class oriented trade unions and especially the CITU affiliated unions have the responsibility to take the lead in this direction. We cannot afford to forget what Comrade B T Ranadive had again and again been reminding us in this regard. He had noted in 1983:

“A dangerous weakness of India’s trade union movement is its isolation from agricultural workers and the mass of peasants. This is bound to be fatal in a country where the agricultural workers and peasants form the overwhelming majority of the people.”

In sum, ending this isolation and building up worker-peasant unity is the task ahead for us and January 19 this year must serve as a reminder of this great task.
