

BHARATIYA KHET MAZDOOR UNION

GENERAL COUNCIL MEETING
NEW DELHI, 19 April, 1989

REPORT TO THE GENERAL COUNCIL

I welcome all of you to this first meeting of our newly elected General Council. The seventh national conference of BKMU held at Palghat in the first week of October 1988 was a big success. Palghat conference was the biggest ever national conference held by BKMU. Eight hundred and forty (840) delegates participated in the conference. It was a success not only from the point of view of excellent arrangements made by the reception committee and the massiveness of the last days' demonstration and rally, but also from the seriousness with which issues facing the agricultural workers were discussed and decisions taken. The Palghat conference has given firm directive and clearer perspective for the agricultural workers' movement. It has laid down the tasks specifically in relation to various important issues.

Apart from the core tasks of fighting for land, wage and against atrocities, the seventh conference has pushed to the forefront the struggle for comprehensive central legislation and employment. The conference has also emphasised the need to actively intervene in the poverty alleviation programme. The need for taking up housing for landless people as an important plank of our activities has also been emphasised.

In relation to the struggle against atrocities it has been pointed out that this struggle should be viewed as a part of the wider struggle for social equality for the deprived people.

The Palghat conference has given firm directive to the central executive committee to take firm and effective measures to remove some of the persistent weaknesses in the functioning of BKMU. In this respect it had laid down a definite task of making the organisation financially self sufficient by raising necessary funds regularly from the agricultural worker masses. This is the first and the most important step the Palghat conference has suggested towards strengthening the organisation and bridging the gap between the growing mass influence of our movement and its organisational capacity.

The Kerala unit of BKMU and comrades of the Reception Committee deserve our congratulation for the successful manner in which they had made all arrangements for the smooth and efficient conduct of the seventh national conference. The Palghat conference will go down as another important landmark in the history of the agricultural workers' movement of our country.

Since most of our leading functionaries and cadres were actively involved in the work of the party conferences at various levels since the Palghat conference it was not possible to concentrate much on the khet mazdoor front in the last six months. Nevertheless many of our state units had taken up some of the most pressing issues affecting agricultural workers and other weaker sections during this period.

At the central level we have paid the most serious attention to the task of implementing one of the most important directives of the seventh national conference ie organising a national fund drive for BKMU. Before going into the details of the planning for fund drive, I wish to refer to some of the important activities our state units had undertaken during this period.

REPORTING:

The Palghat conference decisions were reported to state committee/council meetings held in all the states. In some states district level reporting was also undertaken. In most of our journals reports and articles appeared on Palghat conference and its decisions. However no extensive reporting was done as in the past due to unavoidable reasons.

KERALA:

Immediately after the Palghat conference, the state leaders of the Kerala unit of BKMU met state chief minister and labour and revenue ministers and presented to them the 19 point charter of demands adopted by the state conference of the union held at Pandalam in September 1988. The charter among other issues highlighted the plight of homeless people in the state and demanded immediate steps to solve their problems. It also demanded speedy distribution of all remaining surplus lands. The state unit also issued a serious warning to those land owners who refused to cultivate their lands as a sort of a pressure to get unreasonable concessions from the state government and to deny employment to agricultural workers that such tactics would not be tolerated. It wanted the government to take stern steps against the recalcitrant landowners and cultivation resumed on their lands other wise agricultural workers would take over such lands and start cultivating them.

On 1st March 1989 a special state convention was held at Trichur in which activists from all districts participated. The convention adopted a programme for mobilising agricultural workers for a statewide campaign and struggle for the realisation of the demands raised in the charter submitted earlier to the state Government. It was also decided to organise mandal/taluk wise jathas in all the districts to popularise the demands and to mobilise agricultural workers for the struggle for the realisation of these demands. Accordingly jathas were organised throughout the state from 25th March to 30th March 1989. These jathas went on foot from village to village explaining the decisions of the special convention. This jatha programme was preceded by extensive mandal/taluk level conventions of agricultural workers.

As a first phase of the struggle dharna was organised before the tehsil and block offices through out the state in which agricultural workers participated in large numbers. In many centres agricultural workers had also held demonstrations on that day.

Taking of a census of homeless and landless people in every panchayat and introduction of schemes to provide houses and lands to them; granting of pattas to landless people living on Government, porampoke, road side and canal lands and provision for alternate lands for those among them who can not be given pattas; pension to all agricultural workers who are sixty and above irrespective of their income, the present insistence on income limit to be withdrawn immediately, preparation of village wise register of agricultural workers; revision of minimum wages; introduction of welfare fund and setting up of a welfare corporation for agricultural workers; speedy disposal of pending cases before land tribunals and completion of distribution of surplus lands within a specified time frame; restoration of alienated tribal lands to their legitimate owners; enforcement of the principle of reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in all institutions and establishments run with government aid and in all cooperative societies; provision for water, electricity, roads and sanitation in all harijan and one lakh housing colonies; resurvey of plantation estates and backwater paddy lands to detect excess lands and to distribute such lands among the landless etc; are the main demands raised in the charter presented to the state government.

ANDHRA PRADESH:

The Andhra Pradesh unit of BKMU had sharply condemned the TDP governments efforts at forceful recovery of loans advanced to weaker sections for house construction. Because of continuous droughts in large areas, it was absolutely impossible for the poor people to repay the loan within the stipulated period.

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Similarly attempts to collect water levy in drought affected areas were also opposed by our union. Memorandum to this effect was submitted to government in cooperation with kisan-sabha.

CONVENTION AGAINST ATROCITIES:

A well prepared state level anti-atrocities convention was held at Hyderabad on 11 December 1988. Earlier a joint committee with the participation of A.P. Dalit leaders had been set up for the preparation of this convention. Eight hundred delegates including 100 women coming from 19 out of 22 districts participated in the convention. Besides our union the A.P. Dalit Mahasabha, Gramin Pedala Sangham (Organisation of Village Poor) and Ibrahim Patnam taluk Vyvasaya Cooli Sangham participated. Shri Gopal Rao Etkote retired chief-justice of Andhra Pradesh High Court inaugurated the convention. Eighty two year old veteran freedom fighter Shri Vavilala Gopal Krishnaiah was the chief guest. Shri Bojja Tarakan president A.P. Dalit Maha Sabha moved the main resolution on atrocities. The convention decided to mobilise public opinion against atrocities by holding district wise conventions mass meetings and demonstrations and to organise a massive march to Hyderabad afterwards. It also decided to send a team to Adilabad district to investigate in to allegations of large scale police atrocities on advasis. The convention elected a 15 member standing committee to implement the decisions of the convention.

Land struggle was organised in East Godavari district covering 22 villages. In 20 of these villages new units of agricultural workers union have been formed.

BIHAR:

Under the auspices of the Bihar Rajya Khet Mazdoor Union a state level convention on reservation was held at Patna on 19th November, 1988 in which more than 2000 delegates participated. BKMU president G. Yallamanda Reddy inaugurated the convention. BKMU Vice-President Gurudas Das Gupta, M.P. and West Bengal minister of state for civil defence Sayed Wahid Raza also addressed the convention.

The convention discussed all aspects of the policy on reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in public service. The main resolution was moved by Chandradeo Himanshu. The convention condemned the failure of the central and state governments in fulfilling the quota of posts reserved for SCs and STs. The speakers who participated in the discussion pointed out the allround discrimination being shown to the SCs and STs not only in the matter of appointment in public service but also in all other spheres of social and public life. The convention decided to launch a movement in support of the demand for full justice to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the matter of appointments in public and private services. The movement will be built around the following main demands.

1. Appointment of all youth belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes who have passed matriculation and other higher examinations in suitable jobs.
2. Violation of provisions regarding reservation be made a cognisable offence.

3. Immediate implementation of provisions of reservation in the Bihar Vidhan Mandal Secretariat.
4. Reservation be introduced in the private sector also.
5. The principle of reservation be strictly implemented in the appointment of judges from district to supreme court levels.
6. At least one residential school be opened on each block for students belonging to SCs and STs.

The convention decided to organise district level conventions' and to hold demonstrations before collectorates and also organise dharnas in support of the above demands. The convention on reservation had created a good impression among the weaker sections. This was the first time that agricultural workers union had taken initiative in taking up the issue of reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This initiative showed that the class organisations of agricultural workers are interested not only in the struggle for economic demands but are also equally interested in the struggle for social equality for the weaker sections.

UTTAR PRADESH:

In September 1988, 500 landless families under the leadership of BKMU local unit had occupied Magharati Bandhi lands in Chakia Tehsil in Varanasi district. These lands had been handed over to the irrigation department when the Magharati Bandhi was constructed. 400 acres of these lands had been sown with oil seeds by the occupants. On 3rd October, 1988 the occupants were summoned to the sub-divisional magistrates office under the pretext of distributing pattas. But at the SDMs' office they were threatened with severe punishment unless they vacated the land. When the poor people returned to their place they found that all their huts had been burnt and their belongings taken away. The forest officials accompanied by anti-social elements and the pradhan of the neighbouring Mubarakpur village had set fire to their huts and taken away their belongings. They again put up their huts. On 7th November 1988 the pradhan came for the second time with armed goondas. But this time the occupants stoutly resisted and the pradhan and his goondas were forced to flee. The poor people are still in occupation of the land and are determined to carry on the struggle till pattas are given to them.

PUNJAB:

Our Punjab unit had to concentrate on relief campaign in the flood affected areas of the state. The floods that occurred in September last were very severe and large number of houses collapsed, more than 1000 people lost their lives and property and crop worth several crores of rupees was destroyed. The worst affected districts were Ropar, Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Jalandhur, Ferozepur, Gurudaspur and Amritsar. 7598 villages out of the total 12,500 villages in the state had been affected. The worst sufferers in this natural disaster were khet mazdoors and other poorer sections in the villages. Along with kisan-sabha and also independently our units had extensively campaigned for relief. Our unit demanded Rs. 10,000 for pucca houses, Rs. 5,000 for katcha houses as government assistance to rebuild the destroyed houses, and Rs. 1,000 for clothes and 5 quintals of wheat per family as immediate relief.

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The government was very slow in arranging relief work and whatever it provided was quite inadequate to meet the situation. Our delegation met the governor and submitted a memorandum demanding adequate relief for the affected people. Similarly in all the affected districts memorandums were submitted to district authorities and campaigns organised for immediate and adequate relief.

MADHYA PRADESH:

An organisational conference of BKMU was held at Bhopal on 11 January 1989. 40 delegates from 15 districts participated in the conference. The conference decided to strengthen the state centre of BKMU by deputing a full time cadre to work from the centre and also to strengthen the organisation in the districts and to enrol members to the union in a vigorous manner. The conference also decided to collect Rs. 50,000 for the Rs. 7 lakh BKMU fund.

A detailed programme for campaign for the most pressing demands of agricultural workers was also worked out by the conference. The programme includes district level demonstrations for distribution of ceiling surplus, adequate relief in the drought affected areas implementation of minimum wages and for the demands of forestry workers and for enhancement of wage rate for tendu leaf picking culminating in the satyagraha before Vidhan Sabha in Bhopal in April.

The conference demanded implementation of the cooperativisation plan announced by Madhya Pradesh Government for the collection of tendu leaves and other minor forest produce and the elimination of middlemen from the tendu leaf trade. It also demanded strict implementation of the ordinance on distribution of ceiling surplus lands involved in litigation.

MAHARASHTRA:

The executive committee of the state khet mazdoor union met after Palghat conference. In six districts the Palghat conference decisions have been reported. The state unit had to take up relief campaign in the Marathwada region which was badly hit by floods. In 28 districts morcha had been organised in cooperation with other organisations for the urgent demands of the rural poor. Altogether 30,000 people participated in these morchas. The state Government has revised the minimum wages of agricultural workers. The wages are fixed on zonal basis. There are four zones. The new wage rates range from Rs. 12 to Rs. 20. Our union has been agitating for provision of employment under the employment guarantee scheme in 12 districts.

Six secretaries have been appointed to the state unit. Their travelling expenses would be met by the state centre. It has been decided to organise region wise meetings of agricultural workers. For training of cadres four regional workshops and one central workshop will be held in May 1989.

KARNATAKA:

Meetings of agricultural workers were held in four taluks of Dharwad district on 17 and 18 October 1988 to explain the decisions of the Palghat conference. More than 1000 agricultural workers participated in these meetings. Similar meetings were also held in some centres in Bangalore and Kolar districts.

About 600 people attended these meetings. Participants showed great enthusiasm in hearing the decisions of the Palghat Conference. More and more rural poor particularly those belonging to the backward castes and Scheduled Tribes are coming forward to join /movement of agricultural workers.

In Kudlige taluk of Bellary district a struggle has been going on from September 1988 for occupation of forest dryland by agricultural workers and other landless people. More than 200 agricultural workers have been arrested. About 2000 acres of land have already been occupied and distributed among the landless.

In the same taluk our union fought against retrenchment of 300 agricultural workers from their work by the Dryland Development Board and succeeded in getting them reinstated.

More than 500 people demonstrated before District Development Board at Hubli on 22.11.1988 under the banner of BKMU demanding house sites for poor people.

Over 5000 agricultural workers and peasants participated in a massive demonstrations held Chittapur in Gulbarga district, demanding adequate relief measures to the drought affected people.

A monthlong jatha was jointly organised by khet mazdoor union and kisan sabha in Vittla and Bantwata taluks of Dakshina Kannda in October-November 1988 demanding remunerative prices for peasants produce, supply of pesticides through cooperative societies, pattas for government lands under the cultivating possession of poor people, provision for house sites and lands for landless people and for other common demands of peasants and agricultural workers.

Rs.7 LAKH FUND

The Central Executive Committee which met in New Delhi on 17 and 18 December 1988 had decided to make a concerted drive by all our units after proper preparation for collection of funds from agricultural workers and also from workers at factory gates with the cooperation and help of trade union leaders. It was also decided that the fund collection should be carried out within a few days without allowing it to drag on indefinitely. If it was allowed to drag the momentum will be lost. A handbill was prepared from the centre in English to be multiplied by state units in regional languages and in Hindi in Hindi speaking areas. Each state committee/council had to meet specially to plan the fund drive in detail. District and lower level meetings were also to be held for this purpose. Agricultural workers were to be prepared to massively respond to the fund drive. The importance of making the fund drive a success had to be put into the consciousness of our grass root level workers. Every unit and every union worker had to take up the fund collection as the most important task.

To seek the support and cooperation of trade union cadres we had approached the AITUC. Com. Yallamandam Reddy attended the AITUC working committee meeting. AITUC centre had requested the affiliated unions and state T.U. leaders to provide all possible help to BKMU in organising gate collections.

We had also requested the leadership of the All India Bank Employees' Association to help us in making collection from bank employees.

The central executive committee at its meeting held at Calcutta on 7th March 1989 had reviewed the progress of preparations for fund drive in the states. The meeting decided that fund collection should be organised by the state units between 15 April and 15 May 1989. But each state unit should complete the collection within two weeks. The actual dates were to be fixed by the state units according to their convenience.

States have been allotted quota for fund collection. Each state was expected not only to fulfill the quota but even to exceed the quota. The centres share of the fund was fixed at 15 percent of the total collection. The rest of the fund was to be used in the state. It is also in the interest of every state unit to collect more funds than decided by the CEC.

The fund collection is the first serious drive on our part on a countrywide scale to make a break through on the organisational sphere. Lack of finance has become a major factor which cripples our efforts to make any substantial advance in our activities. Hence the fund drive has assumed great importance.

Reports received so far indicate that our state units are earnestly moving to make the fund drive a success.

ANDHRA PRADESH:

the/ Andhra Pradesh Agricultural Workers Union was the first state unit to move in the fund drive. A state level activists' meeting was held at Hyderabad in the third week of February to review the progress of the campaign for fund drive. It was decided to intensify/campaign and to organise actual house to house collection in the villages from 28 to 30th March 1989 and to have collection from working class at factory gates from 1 to 5 April 1989. Each district council had met specially for discussing and planning the fund drive. Trade Union leaders were also invited to these meetings.

KERALA:

The Kerala state unit had decided to collect Rs. 1.5 lakh and this decision was endorsed by the special convention held at Trichur on 1st March. But districts on their own have decided to collect more than the quota given to them. According/the /to decisions taken by various district units the target of total collection will go up to Rs. 2.5 lakh and the collection is to be carried out between 30 April and 7 May 1989.

PUNJAB:

The Punjab unit has decided to collect more than Rs. 1 lakh. They have also decided to select a number of villages in each block to carry out intensive collection.

BIHAR:

The Bihar Rajya Khet Mazdoor Union has planned to collect Rs. 1 lakh. The collection will be organised in the first week of May.

MAHARASHTRA:

The Maharashtra unit has decided to collect Rs. 27,000. Details of the programme will be worked out in the regional meetings of cadres.

UTTAR PRADESH:

The Uttar Pradesh unit has planned to collect Rs. 30,000.

TAMILNADU:

The Tamilnadu unit will collect Rs. 20,000 in April. The trade union has promised to collect Rs. 10,000.

ORISSA:

The Orissa state committee which met on 22 February 1989 has decided to collect Rs. 20,000. They have also planned to collect funds from workers in two factories in Sambalpur district.

WEST BENGAL:

The West Bengal unit has also planned for fund drive. Details are not yet available.

The General Council has to review the progress of fund drive and take appropriate measures to make it a big success.

LAND STRUGGLE:

Another very important issue to be discussed at this meeting of the General Council is land. We had been carrying on land struggle at selected places in some states. But except in Andhra Pradesh the land struggle has not been conducted in a big way and in a sustained manner. We can no longer afford to ignore the land issue. The Congress (I) governments at the centre and in the states as well as other non-Congress(I) bourgeois opposition governments have miserably failed to implement the land ceiling laws and distribute surplus lands among the landless. The whole issue of land reform has now been pushed to the background. The big landlords have been allowed to retain hold over vast areas of land through benami and other illegal methods with the connivance of the administration. By and large land concentration continues. Nor are the bourgeois governments interested in distributing available government, banjar and other cultivable lands among the landless poor. Unless the agricultural workers and landless people and other land poor peasants are mobilised through out the country and moved into nationwide struggle for forceful occupation of ceiling surplus lands and other available lands, the land problem is not going to be solved. Our organisation has to take the initiative in this respect. We have to organise this struggle jointly as well as independently.

STRUGGLE FOR CENTRAL LEGISLATION:

Now it is clear that the centre has been deliberately evading responsibility for bringing in a central law for agricultural workers despite the unanimous recommendation of the MPS' sub-committee which enquired into the condition of agricultural workers. Only a powerful nationwide united struggle of agricultural workers can compel the Government to concede the demand for a comprehensive legislation. We have to explore the possibility of organising such/united struggle in consultation with other organisations.

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WAGE STRUGGLE:

Wherever wages are low, and wages are not paid according to the notified rates our units will to organise struggles including strikes. But in recent years the wage question has not been given sufficient importance by many state units. The questions of employment, central legislation, setting up of separate enforcement machinery etc. are all related to the wage issue.

STRUGGLE AGAINST ATROCITIES:

The Andhra Pradesh convention against atrocities is a welcome and inspiring initiative in the struggle against atrocities. Such conventions should be held in all the states. Special attention should be paid in organising such conventions in states which are chronically affected by atrocities. Widest possible mobilisation will have to be done in such states. All well meaning progressive and liberal minded sections should be approached for their active participation in the struggle against atrocities.

HOUSING:

Our units had been taking active interest in getting house-sites allotted to the landless agricultural workers and other rural poor. We will continue to campaign for house-sites in areas where these have not been provided so far. But the question of housing for agricultural workers has now to be taken up in a big way. We should demand a massive house construction scheme for agricultural workers and other landless and homeless people in the rural areas.

EMPLOYMENT:

Our units should intensify the campaign for introduction of employment guarantee schemes in the states. At the same time our units will have to effectively intervene in the working of the various rural employment schemes that are being taken up by state governments in order to ensure full payment of notified minimum wages to agricultural workers and also to eliminate corruption in their working.

INTERVENTION IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES:

Though we had decided that our units should actively intervene in the working of the poverty alleviation programmes no state unit has taken any concrete step in this direction. The state units should study the programmes being taken up by the state governments and its actual working and start intervening in the implementation of these programmes. Only through our intervention we can eliminate or minimise corruption in the working of these programmes and ensure that benefits derived from these programmes actually go to the deserving people among the rural workers.

While struggling for the solution of the economic and social problems of agricultural workers our organisation has always participated in the general democratic struggle of our people. We will join the left and democratic forces of our country in a much more active manner in the struggle against the anti-people pro-monopoly economic policies of the Rajiv Gandhi Government. We will continue to extend our full support and cooperation to the working class in their struggle against closure, retrenchment and lockouts and the mounting attacks on their hard earned trade union rights.

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No-2

BKMU IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE RURAL POOR

It is 22 years since Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union (BKMU) was founded. BKMU was formed at an all India conference of representatives of agricultural workers held at Moga in Punjab in September, 1968.

BKMU was a pioneer in the agricultural labour movement of our country. Prior to the formation of BKMU, there was no national level organisation of agricultural workers in India even though unions of agricultural workers used to function in some states like Andhra-Pradesh, Kerala, Punjab, Tamilnadu and West Bengal.

BKMU was founded at a time when agricultural workers were fast emerging as a distinct class of wage workers in the rural areas as a result of the transformation that was taking place in agriculture. Agricultural workers were subjected not only to semi-feudal exploitation but also to capitalist exploitation in areas where agriculture was being developed in a capitalist direction. Over and above this they were subjected to caste and social oppression particularly in places where semi-feudal relations were still very dominant. Minimum wages in that period ranged between 50 paise and Rs.2/-. But even these wages were not paid to the workers. In most backward areas the then prevailing wage level was between 25 paise and 50 paise. Agricultural workers sweated and toiled and produced wealth for the country. But they themselves were compelled to live in abject poverty, privations and sufferings.

It was BKMU which formulated the demands of agricultural workers on a national plane. The Charter of Demands adopted by the Moga conference covered all major problems of agricultural workers like wage, employment, land, house-sites, social oppression, indebtedness, supply of essentials at controlled rates, free legal aid etc. This charter of demands was presented to the central and state governments. A big nation wide campaign was unleashed to popularise the charter of Demands among the agricultural workers masses and the general public.

The charter of demands became a rallying point for the rural poor in their struggle for better living and working conditions.

In 1969 the newly formed all India organisation of agricultural workers plunged itself into the struggle for cultivable government and banjar lands which assumed the form of land occupation in a number of states like Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Uttar Pradesh.

In 1970 BKMU participated actively in the great land struggle which was fought jointly in cooperation with CPI and All India Kisan Sabha which compelled the central and state Governments to revise the ceiling laws by reducing the ceiling limit and removing many of the exemptions allowed earlier. A national guideline was issued by the centre for the purpose of revising the ceiling laws. But to get the revised ceiling laws passed by the states, the agricultural workers and peasants had to relentlessly campaign in 1971 and 1972. BKMU was in the forefront of this campaign.

Since its inception the Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union had taken up the question of wage. Numerous struggles were fought locally and even statewise for wage increase ^{and} for the upward revision of minimum wages. For the first time agricultural workers went for an all India wage struggle in 1974 at the call of BKMU in which lakhs of workers participated. The strike struggle was very bitter in a number of places. ^{In} many areas agricultural workers could secure wage increase. A number of agricultural workers including a local union leader lost their lives in this struggle due to land lord violence. Wage struggle had become a regular part of the normal activities of BKMU units. Where ever necessary wage struggle has been fought either locally or at district and state level.

One big landmark in the history of BKMU was the heroic struggle it put up against the violent landlord offensive on rural poor in 1977 and 1978 which culminated in a massive rally of agricultural workers before Parliament in March, 1979. Five lakh people participated in this rally.

This was the first ever demonstration of the rural poor in ^{the} national capital Delhi.

On behalf of the demonstrators, ^a 5-point charter of demands was presented to Parliament. End to atrocities, implementation of land-reforms, enforcement minimum wage and central legislation for agricultural workers, provisions for house-sites and houses and introduction of employment guarantee schemes were the main demands included in the charter.

This massive march to parliament helped in ^{projecting} ~~focussing~~ the problems of agricultural workers at the national level. For the first time Government had to realise the growing strength of the agricultural labour movement. It was after this historic demonstration that the central Government took some steps to seriously examine the problems of agricultural workers. A central standing committee for ~~un~~organised ~~rural~~ Labour was setup at the centre to examine the problems of the rural poor and to advise the Government on measures required to deal with these problems. It was this committee which adopted a draft bill for agricultural workers in 1980 and submitted to Government. After dillydallying with the issue for two years, congress I Government at the centre scuttled the move. Since then the struggle for central legislation had become a major task of the agricultural labour movement. At present a united campaign for central legislation is gathering momentum.

The struggle for land did not end with the adoption of revised ceiling laws. Actually ^b bigger struggle had to be fought ^{for the} ~~at the centre~~ implementation of the revised laws but the Congress- I, ^Government and in the states did not show any keen interest in the implement-[^]ation of land reforms. Landlords were allowed to indulge in various sorts of illegal and benami deals to defeat the purpose of the law.

Only a small portion of the estimated surplus lands had been made available for distribution among the landless. Hence BKMU had to launch a struggle in various ^{parts} of the country to forcibly occupy lands including ceiling surplus lands.

Most extensive struggle was organised in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. In Andhra Pradesh the struggle spread to all parts of state. About 4 lakh acres of land were occupied by the rural poor in the last four years in the state.

In Bihar in many places the landlords musclemen had resorted to violence, but still the rural poor succeeded in occupying lands in several places. Both in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar a number of landless workers and union activists were killed in landlord violence. The struggle is continuing in a number of places in different states.

BKMU had consistently fought against social oppression and atrocities and made great efforts to build public opinion against perpetration of crimes against the rural poor. In a number of places its activists had directly intervened in defence of the victims. The fight against untouchability and social inequalities has been taken up as a major task of BKMU in its struggle for a better life for the rural poor.

It was due to the growing struggles of the rural poor that the Government had to take a number of measures like poverty alleviation and rural employment schemes. BKMU has played a leading and major role in building a nationwide strong and militant agricultural labour movement in our country.

BKMU has been fighting not only for the socio-economic demands of agricultural workers, but also has been participating in the general national democratic struggles of our people. It has been participating actively in the struggle against communal, extremist and terrorist elements to preserve communal peace and to safe guard the national unity and integrity of our country. Both in the struggle for the cause of the rural poor and for safe guarding the unity and integrity of India, it has lost a large number of its valuable cadres. But BKMU will continue to carry on the struggle unflinchingly and steadfastly.

It is with a sense of dedication and humiliation that we are appealing for generous support and cooperation from our people in our endeavour to serve the rural poor more effectively.

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No 3 / 11

BKMU IN THE STRUGGLE FOR COMPREHENSIVE CENTRAL
LEGISLATION FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS.

BY G. YALLAMANDA REDDY

It was in 1968 when the first conference was held in Moga, Punjab, and Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union (BKMU) was founded and a charter of demands for agricultural workers was adopted, ~~in~~ ^{that} ~~which~~ the main aspects for a comprehensive central legislation ~~was~~ ^{were} enumerated.

1st November 1968 was observed as charter day and demonstrations were held throughout the country to implement the charter of demands. Since then, the BKMU has been carrying on a relentless struggle for a comprehensive central legislation for agricultural workers.

The second conference of BKMU ~~was~~ ^{had} held in 1972 ~~and~~ planned a country-wide struggle for need based minimum wage, dearness allowance, compensation, security, fixation of hours of work, equal wages and maternity benefits for women workers and a separate department for agricultural workers. Number of campaigns and strikes were conducted on these issues.

Credit goes to the Achuta Menon government which enacted the Kerala agricultural workers act 1974, first of its kind in the country to ~~safeguard~~ ^{regard} the interests of agricultural workers.

It provides for security of employment, fixation of reasonable wages and hours of work, provident fund, creation of necessary machinery for implementing the provisions of the act. This is a big achievement of the agricultural workers' movement in the country and in particular in Kerala.

The third conference of the BKMU held in May 1974 categorically demanded a comprehensive central legislation for agricultural workers. The conference gave a clarion call to agricultural workers to go ^{for} in a nation-wide struggle for wage increase and ~~other demands of the~~ ^{other demands connected with} central legislation.

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Number of strikes took place in different parts of the country facing tremendous resistance and attacks by landlords. Because of these struggles upward revision of minimum wages has been effected in most of the states.

There was a great march of half a million agricultural workers and other rural poor on March 20, 1979 organised by BKMU. One of the most important demands in the charter presented to the Lok Sabha was for a comprehensive central legislation.

It was a historic march and first of its kind and inspired lakhs of agricultural workers. It had great impact on the people and government, highlighting the demands of central legislation, radical land reforms, wage increase, and against atrocities, etc.

A national convention of agricultural workers for a comprehensive central legislation was held in October 1979 in Delhi ~~in October~~ jointly by Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union, All India Kisan Sabha (CPI-M), Hind Khet Mazdoor Sabha, ^{and} Rashtriya ^{Gramin} Mazdoor Congress.

In the background and impact of militant mobilisation of agricultural workers, the government of India started the programme of integrated rural development (IRDP) in 1979 and it was extended to the whole country from 1980. National rural employment programme (NREP) was started from April 1981.

It was decided in Rajgir (Bihar) national conference of BKMU to conduct countrywide one-day strike during 1982 kharif season to press the demand for wage increase, enforcement of minimum wages, ^{and} comprehensive central legislation.

There was one day strike throughout the country. About two million agricultural workers directly participated in the strikes, while four million agricultural workers were covered by the campaigns. A dozen agricultural workers lost their lives in this struggle.

The BKMU decided to organise one-day general strike throughout the country ~~on the same day~~ on the ^{specific} ~~only~~ issue of comprehensive central legislation for agricultural workers. The strike took place on July 15, 1983 throughout the country.

More than two million agricultural workers took part in the strike. About a lakh of them participated in the demonstrations before block and taluka offices. ~~The one day general strike was first of its kind in the history of agricultural workers movement in the country.~~

This has created a confidence among the agricultural workers. It has given an idea and inspiration that they are not small in number, and not alone in villages, but are in crores in the country and act unitely expressing solidarity and strength of all of them to achieve their demands.

The fact that more than two million participated in the strike despite all hardships and repression, attacks by landlords showed that the slogan of a "comprehensive central legislation" had caught the imagination of the masses of agricultural workers and they are ready to struggle for the same.

Just after the strike, the central government was forced to announce in August 1983 the rural landless employment guarantee scheme to provide at least one member of each landless household employment upto 100 days in a year.

It was decided by the coordination committee of the four organisations of Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union, All India Agricultural Workers Union, Indian National Rural and Allied Workers Federation and Hind Khet Mazdoor Sabha to organise dharnas before district collector offices on January 29, 1984 as an all India day for comprehensive central legislation. Dharnas were organised in about half of the districts in the country.

There was a national convention called by the same organisations on August 2, 1984 in Delhi. This convention demanded central legislation and ~~it~~ appealed to struggle for the same.

In the background of the struggles of BKMU independently and jointly with other organisations, employment guarantee and the poverty alleviation schemes, pension schemes and others were announced though half heartedly and piece-meal.

But they are not sincerely implemented to cover all the eligible agricultural workers. The Congress (I) government many times promised to bring the central legislation for agricultural workers, but on one pretext or the other it refused to bring the bill.

A sub-committee of the parliament's consultative committee attached to the union labour ministry headed by Gurudas Das Gupta had prepared a most useful report and made a number of recommendation including a comprehensive central legislation. But the Congress I government did not implement the recommendations of the committee.

Soon after the formation of the National Front government a delegation of the BKMU met the prime minister and presented a memorandum which ^{demandes} ~~includes~~ central legislation for agricultural workers. ^{among other things.} They also met the labour minister and presented a model bill.

The prime minister and the ~~minister for labour~~ ^{ministers were} ~~are~~ favourable ^{the demand for central legislation} to ~~bring the said bill~~. The ministry of labour organised a national seminar on agricultural labourers on March 8-9, 1990.

More than 150 representatives of state government, agricultural workers' organisations, peasants organisations, research organisations, labour institutes, voluntary organisations participated in this seminar. The prime minister inaugurated and the labour minister presided over the seminar.

By and large the seminar arrived at a consensus for a comprehensive central legislation which provides trade union rights, reasonable minimum wages, pension, welfare fund, maternity benefits and equal wages for women workers, security and guarantee of employment and separate labour department etc. The labour minister was favourable to bring the legislation as soon as possible.

But there are forces which oppose the central legislation for agricultural workers on one pretext or the other. The left and democratic agricultural workers organisation have to carry on a sustained determined struggle of the agricultural workers in the coming days, to intervene and ^{put pressure on} ~~support~~ the National Front government to bring the comprehensive central legislation for agricultural workers.

We have to take the help and cooperation of the broad masses of left, democratic and secular forces in the country.

We have to take initiative to carry on countrywide campaigns and struggles in dependently and unitedly with other organisations to get the comprehensive central legislation for agricultural workers *enacted without any further delay.*

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