

19. LARO JONKO, General Secretary, United Mineral Workers Union, Tribal leader and Leader of Mines.

Date & Time:- 1st session 5.05 pm evening to 8.00 pm ;

2nd session 8.00 pm to 10.00 pm.

3rd session 9.00 pm to 11.00 pm.

27th Jan. 2003 and 28th Jan. 2003.

Venue:- at United Mineral Workers Union office at Chakradharpur in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand.

Interviewer:- Bobby Poulouse

Context:- Laro Jonko is a unique AITUC leader in the sense that she is a the lone tribal woman leader at that senior level of AITUC leadership in the Jharkhand state and also recognized by the national level. She was a simple tribal girl who worked herself in the mines as a worker and was picked by the great leader of Gua mines struggle one Mr. Purnendu Mazumdar and developed into a proper trade union leader. She is a genuine leader of the mines in Chakradharpur and tribal areas.

Laro Jonko began by saying that her father and mother were doing farming and her job was to pick up wood from the forest and sell it in the villages. Then she went to Calcutta and worked there in a brick klin for 8 years. She save Rs. 20/- to Rs. 40/- per month and sent it home. Then she worked as a gang khallashi at Rajghampore and worked in that job for more than 3 months. It was at that time that Dalmia had purchased a mine in Chakradharpur area and work was to start there. One Mr. Shraff was given the contract and he gave Rs. 6/- for 6 days of work. Thus Laro Jonko said her life was such that she went to Calcutta for 8 years and worked in a brick klin then came back and stayed at home for 1 year at home. Then she worked for 3 months as a khallasi. Then she said for two years she sold wood. Then she worked in Chiruburu mines. There was no bonus and the wage

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was very low. It was while working at Chiruburu mines that for the first time she came in contact with Purnendu Mazumdar. He came with one lady named Bulatai and said that he will bring the red flag and get them minimum wage and various other things. Then Purnendu Mazumdar went off to Delhi. She said we workers at the Churuburu mines started doubting him whether he will do something or he was just giving false dreams. He organized them and the mine workers of Churuburu mines demanded a 20% bonus which Dalmia and Shroff rejected and they closed the mine for 3 years. This was a huge challenge for the workers who were now jobless and then she got associated with Purnendu Mazumdar and they organized all the mine workers at their villages and together tried to force the Dalmias and Shroffs to open the mine. But it did not work and the owner deliberately closed the mine for three years to crush the mine workers demands and struggle. After this Churuburu struggle said Laro Jonko she got associated with Purnendu Mazumdar in a major way and along with him started organizing beedi workers, china clay workers, iron stone workers and other mine workers. Then they also worked among corgite mine workers for three years and for that moved from village to village. Then they organized forest workers, beedi workers, iron ore mine workers, and kisans in Manoharpur. During the three years when Churuburu mines were closed Laro Jonko said that she along with Purnendu Mazumdar organized various workers and the result was that in 1975 there was an agreement that the mining companies signed with their union United Mineral Workers Union under the leadership of leader Ram Dulari Sinha. Under the agreement out of 2000 labourers 1300 were women and 700 males. 7 post were left for ladies to be appointed as 'munshis' 6 posts for supervisors. They managed to get a rate of Rs. 5.25/- per day for the corgite mine workers. The males were to get a salary of Rs. 6.00/- per day; the munshis would get a salary of Rs. 7.00/- per day; Rs. 6.00/- per day for mud cutting for males; Rs. 5.25/- per day female laborers involved in mud cutting. Apart from that they got facilities like creche, canteen, and a bonus of Rs. 8.33/- in a year. As regards the beedi workers they got Rs.2/- for making 1000 beedis, and also Rs. 3/- & Rs.4/- for making 1000 beedis.

Then Laro Jonko said she worked to organize workers at the Chadil mine. Also she organized to get bonus for mine labourers in corgite mines. However when she tried to organize a union in Chandil mines the management organized a 'dalal union' under the leadership of one of the tribals thus trying to undercut her influence as a tribal. Then in the iron ore mine at Karampada owned by one Mrs. Misrilal Pvt. Ltd. , she managed to create a membership of nearly 500 to 600 workers. The dalal union organized some lumpen tribals to beat up Laro Jonko and she very nearly got beaten up if it were not for the escape. In mines owned by Mrs. Misrilal she used to give only Rs. 3/- per box to both male and female but due to their organizing the workers they began to get Rs.5/- per box. The management was forced to give other facilities like safety things, creches, maternity benefit, safety boots and etc.

Laro Jonko narrated that she worked for 5 years in the Chiruburu mines which was closed when she and Purnendu Mazumdar tried to organize a union there. She organized workers in various mines which she mentioned like- Karapada, Bundillak, Jhinkapu, Chetra, Rodo, Gua, Jariakillay, Chiriya. She also narrated how she developed a conflict with JMM leaders one of whom was another tribal woman named Suma Kunkel. In fact her brother was murdered by

dalal tribal union leaders and supported by some JMM tribal leaders. It was a personal attack on her to break her will but it did not stop her. However as if that blow of the killing of her family member was not enough her guide and mentor Purnendu Mazumdar died of liver cancer. Then she went to Czechoslovakia and later to USA. After Purnendu Mazumdar died in 1991 she completely left politics from 1991 for almost 2 years. But other trade union leaders came and told her to rejoin the trade union and organize the workers as no one but she was the natural leader after the death of Purnendu Mazumdar. In 1993 she was made the General Secretary of United Mineral Workers Union and since then she has been working on issues of releasing workers from bonded labour, adivasi issues, pension, below poverty line mine workers and tribals, and fighting against social evils among tribals like witchcraft which had many cases off late and also alcoholism and others. Laro Jonko herself had a brush with death when she developed a big tumor in her stomach which was operated upon and removed by the support of senior leaders. Today she can't cycle, other her mode of transport was the cycle. Today there is another comrade who cycles her. She did not marry. She was also interviewed by Mahashweta Devi who came to her and interviewed her. Laro Jonko otherwise is a fighting woman and does not have a single white hair perhaps due to her simple tribal food. There is no doubt that she is a unique tribal leader and that too tribal woman who committed herself to bettering the conditions of all tribal and non-tribal and she did manage to do so.

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Laro Jonko is a unique leader in the sense that she is a woman trade unionist, a woman from the tribal community, and a leader who developed from being a mine worker. Thus hers is a case of a worker becoming a leader. Her development was largely influenced by Purnendu Mazumdar who picked her up when she was a mine worker and encouraged her to take up leadership in struggles in various mines and slowly she picked up and so today she despite her illness is the recognized leader in the mines near Chakradharpur in Singhbhum district. She worked in the Gua mines struggle with Purnendu Mazumdar. Her work was in many other mines of Chiruburu, Chandil mines, Karapada mines, Budilak, Jhinkapu, Chetra, Rodo, Jariakillay Chiriya mines of Singhbhum district. She suffered personally in the sense that her brother was killed due to trade union rivalry with JMM tribal leader Suma Kunkei put up by the mine contractors against Laro Jonko's union. Personally she suffered. However she has become a kind of tribal woman icon in the sense that one of the greatest writers in Hindi Mahashweta Devi came to interview her because there are so few genuine tribal woman leaders more so doing trade unionism. She fought against many social evils among the adivasi community particularly witch hunting through which many adivasi girls were killed. Laro Jonko was part of a film on the issue of witch hunting. She is also involved with the world indigenous peoples movement.