

*Editorial*

## End this Fratricide, Adopt Mass Revolutionary Approach to Resolving Differences

The recent inter-group killings in Bihar are a matter of pain and grave concern for all the communist revolutionary organisations, their sympathisers, and democrats. The issue concerns not only the groups directly involved, but the communist revolutionary camp as a whole.

The groups involved are two communist revolutionary organisations -- Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) and CPI(ML) Party Unity. Also involved is an organisation, CPI(ML) Liberation, which, though now in the revisionist stream, retains a large number of revolutionary activists and sympathisers. This series of killings has been going on for the last one and a half years.

Bihar is perhaps the country's most backward state and exhibits the most shameful feudal culture, feudal oppression and exploitation. For over two decades it has also been the arena of fierce anti-feudal battles led by various contingents of communist revolutionaries. In the face of naked State and landlord terror shorn of all pretence of civil liberties, the communist revolutionaries of Bihar have exhibited sterling courage in leading the people. It is with the blood of hundreds of martyrs that the revolutionary peasant struggles of Bihar have flourished: struggles that are a source of encouragement and hope to people and revolutionary forces throughout the country.

Particularly today, when the ruling class camp is in such disarray, and the mass of people are desperately searching for an alternative to this degenerate system, the revolutionary peasant struggles of Bihar have the potential of maturing into a consistent

agrarian revolutionary movement, showing the people the real path to liberation.

It is therefore all the more damaging that these organisations have targeted each other when their concerted blows could have weakened the enemy. As was to be expected, the bourgeois press has had a field-day highlighting these killings and portraying them as a struggle for control over commissions from contractors. Far from refuting this anti-communist propaganda vigorously, the respective organisations have explained their actions in terms of defending "their" respective areas from intrusion by other forces. It is significant that the killings have not taken place as the result of inter-squad clashes, but are largely killings by squads of unarmed members or sympathisers of other groups.

We appeal to the leaderships and comrades of the concerned organisations to put an immediate end to this fratricide and attempt to resolve differences relating to the sphere of practical activity in a comradely fashion. No doubt there are serious political differences between the groups which cannot be immediately resolved. However, it is the *people* who, in the course of the revolutionary movement and the implementation of contending lines, play the decisive role in establishing the correct political line and leadership. For the people to be able to play that role, the communist revolutionary forces must be able to the extent possible both to project the aspect of their unity against the enemy and their differences in a fashion that the people can grasp and decide on them. Moreover, the people should feel secure in the knowledge that their non-acceptance of any view or will of a revolutionary organisation shall not incur the use of force against them. Such a genuine contention between different political lines has been crassly degraded to armed contention for territory. The comrades concerned need also to reflect on what aspects of their tactical line, instead of building the revolutionary authority of the masses of people, have reduced them to helpless spectators or victims of the clashing of group powers. Lastly, if the organisations concerned feel that the compulsions and problems driving them onto the undesirable path of such clashes are not being fairly understood, they should in all seriousness place their explanations before the communist revolutionary camp and also before the people.

## Organising Agricultural Labour in Punjab

... by a correspondent

Agricultural labourers and landless peasants constitute roughly two-fifths of the rural population of Punjab. They belong mostly to the "scheduled castes". Devoid of land or any other means of production and subject to intense economic exploitation and social oppression, these sections have been pushed to live a wretched life of deprivation and degradation. Politically, too, the level of democratic consciousness among them is quite low and they are generally an unorganised lot.

The so-called green revolution, ushered in in the early seventies and patronised and financed by world imperialists, resulted in further widening the prevailing disparities among the rural classes. It benefited a tiny layer of rural landlords, moneylenders and rich peasants while ruining and pauperising the lower classes, especially the poor peasants and rural proletarians. The advent of agricultural machinery into Punjab's agriculture on a massive scale severely hit employment opportunities of the rural labouring classes. The "green revolution" led to the entanglement of Punjab's agriculture in a cobweb of fertilisers, pesticides, loans, etc. It is finding it hard to extricate itself from this entanglement. Throughout the following decades, the spiralling prices of agricultural inputs, the falling crop yields, the depressed markets for farm products and the continuously worsening terms of trade for agri-products *vis-a-vis* industrial goods has resulted in a grave crisis in the agrarian sector.

Farming, as an occupation, has become quite disadvantageous for a vast section of the peasantry, in particular for the poor and lower-middle peasants. But the agrarian crisis has hit the wage earners, in particular, very severely. The shrinking employment

and earnings have led to a further fall in their already miserable living standards. Now, under the "new economic policy", with its main thrust at curtailing employment, reducing subsidies and social welfare expenditures, marginalising public distribution system, and aggravating price increases, the rural poor are being further pushed to the wall.

The dalit bastis of the rural labouring classes in Punjab have been reliable vote-banks of the Congress party -- so far the leading political party of the Indian ruling classes. But with the current political decline and disintegration of the Congress party, the process of disillusionment of the dalits with the Congress, too, has rapidly advanced. The Akali Dal, being a political representative of the rural feudal landlord sections and sections of *jatt* rich peasants who are responsible for the social subjugation and economic exploitation of the rural labouring classes, never succeeded in gaining a viable foothold among the rural dalit sections. The traditional communist parties of Punjab had a significant constituency among the rural poor in some selected belts but, of late, the process of their ideological-political degeneration being speeded up and their political role as adjunct of ruling class parties becoming more and more pronounced, their influence has been on the wane. The BSP, proclaiming itself the sole champion of dalit interests, has succeeded in making some initial inroads among the dalits. But its utterly casteist orientation, its thoroughgoing opportunist politics of hobnobbing with any political force in its hankering for power-grabbing, its known abhorrence of class struggles, and the dismal performance of its elected parliamentary representatives, etc, has started a rapidly growing disenchantment of the rural dalit sections with it. The communist revolutionary and democratic forces do have some influence among the rural labouring classes but it is, as yet, limited and scattered in isolated pockets of Punjab. So, in a way, the rural labouring classes are unorganised and politically uncommitted to any party. This provides ample space for the democratic revolutionary forces of Punjab to put down roots among them.

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The emergence of the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union (PKMU) in the latter half of 1993 as a mass militant class organisation of rural labouring sections, and with its anti-feudal, anti-imperialist orientation, was a significant step in the direction of building an agrarian revolutionary movement. The PKMU, since its inception, has been waging struggles on the day-to-day burning as well as basic issues of the rural labouring sections. It is not intended here to list all its activities and achievements. But basing on its experience, however limited it may be, we intend to focus on some salient features of the agricultural labour movement in Punjab as well as the problems it is grappling with these days.

#### **An intense urge for organisation and struggle**

A strong urge exists among the rural labouring sections to organise themselves. Thus any genuine effort in this direction is sure to get an enthusiastic response. The roots of this urge lie in the centuries-old inveterate feudal domination, inhuman caste oppression, and economic exploitation of these sections.

A casual glance over the grim life-realities of an agricultural contract labourer will amply testify to this. An agricultural labourer, lucky enough to get employment and working on a yearly contract with the landowner, lives a wretched life akin to a beast of burden. He is neither given the usual weekly off nor any other holiday throughout the year. Whenever he has to avail any leave due to any urgent need in the family, such as due to marriage, death, illness, or any other engagement, he is charged much more than the average wage being paid to him. At work, he is a round-the-clock servant of his master. Apart from his work in agricultural operations, he has to do all sorts of household chores for the master. Sometimes, even his family members have to do 'begar' (service without payment) for the landowner. In peak-work seasons, he is forced to forsake rest and sleep for days together due to the inordinate rush of work. This forced sleeplessness at times results in serious accidents while working on machinery. In cases of serious accidents leading to amputation of limbs or crippling injuries, the landowner is not required to pay for the treatment or missed days. Even in cases of serious disability or death, no compensation is paid. Although he has to work for unlimited hours, yet his average wage is much lower

than the stipulated minimum wage. Apart from economic exploitation, he has to face caste discrimination and indignities. He is, too often, abused or insulted by the landowner on flimsy pretexts or at times without any pretext at all. The dalit women, who go to the fields for collecting hay for the animals are often sexually harassed. An irregular farm-hand hardly gets work for three or four months in a whole year. The rising prices of daily necessities force the labouring families to slash their consumption of bare necessities even further. These grim realities of the life of these sections provide the objective basis of their intense urge to get organised. The enhanced awareness among the dalit sections has aggravated their feelings about the pinch of these inhuman living conditions.

This enthusiasm for getting organised, and their immense potential in self-organisation, can be vividly seen at work in the Malout area of Punjab, the native area of Prakash Singh Badal, present chief minister of Punjab.

Under the inspiration of some radical youth, the energetic dalit labourers of a village here organised themselves into a union and elected a representative body of the organisation. They came in contact with the PKMU. With the support and guidance of the PKMU leadership, they waged many a successful struggle over local issues. These preliminary victories emboldened them and helped enhance their courage, their conviction and their self-confidence. Then the dalit labourers from neighbouring villages began to approach them for help and guidance in redressing their grievances and in building their organisation. They began undertaking mobilisation-cum-expansion campaigns. During these campaigns big contingents of dalit men and women visited the nearby villages, shared their experiences with them in their own rustic style, and inspired and aroused the labouring families there. An upsurge-like situation was developed in the dalit bastis and units of the union began coming up in village after village.

The enhanced requirements of organisational work posed the need for a whole-time activist. They chose from amongst them an activist as a full-time activist. The labouring people of the village voluntarily undertook the responsibility for his family's upkeep. A spontaneous drive for wheat collection ensued and the wholetime's family was supplied with wheat enough for many

months' consumption. He was provided with a bicycle and was instructed to keep volunteers with him for his defence. Now a similar upsurge-like situation prevails at many other places in the state.

The experience of organising the rural dalit labouring sections has brought to the fore an important problem faced in building the revolutionary movement of these sections. The problem appears in the form of a contradiction between the expansion and the consolidation of the organisation. The expansion of the organisation far exceeds the development of cadre-force required to cope with this expansion. No doubt, it is a general problem of the democratic revolutionary movement; but its specificity here lies in the fact that, whereas the objective push for the extension of the organisation is much stronger in the case of rural dalit sections, the development of the activists is much slower (in comparison also with other sections) owing to the all-round domination and oppression by higher castes and classes on the dalits and the lower level of literacy and political consciousness among the dalits. The cadres develop only by learning through their own experience which is a rather slow and protracted process. Hence, the contradiction between the development (expansion) of the union organisation and the development of the cadre-force, or the activists, is very acute in the case of backward sections like dalits. To compensate partly for this shortfall of cadres, activists from other sections can be inducted. But will they be acceptable to the broader ranks of the rural labouring classes as their own activists and leaders? Experience is that the dalit labouring sections accept activists from other classes as their leaders only after judging them through their own practice; especially so, if they are from higher castes. But at the same time, it is found that there is no hesitation in accepting non-dalits as their leaders provided they are found committed to their cause and can mix with them easily and freely.

Experience also is that the repeated deceptions by the ruling class parties with rural dalit labouring sections has given rise to their general disgust with the vote-parties of the ruling classes. Although some political force with pro-dalit rhetoric may yet get some initial response from the unorganised dalits, that will not be able to strike deep roots among those sections. The severity

of their life is constantly prodding them towards sharp struggles with the prevailing set-up. Only a fighting mass militant leadership, committed to their cause, can penetrate deep and strike roots among the rural dalits. The process of so swift a disillusionment of the rural labouring sections with the BSP is a good pointer.

### Sharp reaction

Any attempt, howsoever preliminary, on the part of rural dalit labourers to organise themselves evokes a spontaneous and sharp reaction of the upper caste landlord and rich peasant sections. Any attempt at change in their social, political or economic domination over the rural poor is unacceptable to them. The more organisation of dalit labourers is conceived as a challenge to their authority. They cry out in panic, "Today they are holding meetings. Tomorrow they will refuse to work in the fields. And the day after they will try to seize the lands!" And they counter-attack with a vengeance.

How even this preliminary activity of the rural labouring sections becomes an eye-sore to them, can be seen from the following concrete cases. In village Kusa of district Moga, the water tap in the dalit basti was out of order for quite some time, causing much hardship to the inhabitants of the basti. When repeated pleadings with the concerned authorities failed to move them, the local PKMU leaders issued a press statement denouncing the indifference of the water works department towards their genuine grievances. There was not even a word in the statement against anybody in the village; even so, it was conceived as an affront on the part of the dalits. The *jatt*-dominated village panchayat called an assembly of the village panchayat, where PKMU leaders were summoned to explain why they issued the press statement without seeking their permission. In another similar case in village Rasulpur of district Nawan Shahar, reacting to the statement of state leaders of the PKMU regarding the issue of residential plots for dalits, the local upper caste landlord sections called a meeting of the village panchayat to intimidate and denounce the local union leaders. These are only two examples of upper caste chauvinism and class offensive by the rural feudal classes against the low-caste agricultural labouring class sections.

A similar class-cum-caste prejudice of the dominant landed sections against the dalit labourers was evident during a glorious and long-drawn-out struggle against a tyrant landlord of village Manawan in district Ferozepore. This notorious landlord cold-bloodedly murdered two agricultural labourers by torturing them. Like a typical feudal lord, this notorious landlord often held his private court where he inflicted heavy fines and other punishments on the village people. The brutal murder of the agricultural labourers unleashed the pent-up anger and hatred among the village people towards such oppression. The village peasants and dalit labourers participated *en masse* in a struggle against the tyrant landlord. But as the struggle progressed and the PKMU began to mobilise agricultural labour of the adjoining areas, class and caste prejudices began to rear their heads. The landlord and rich peasant dominated leadership of the Bharti Kisan Union (Lakhawal faction) began to play on these prejudices and ultimately came out in open support of the landlord. In private, even the BKU leaders confessed that the landlord was responsible for the murders and needed to be punished. But they grew apprehensive of the growing class force of the PKMU and their own class prejudices and apprehensions overtook the contradiction they felt with the landlord over the murders.

In landlord-dominated Malout area of Punjab, the spread of PKMU units in the area has alarmed the landlords. The landlords of the area are acting in unison to check the growing influence of the PKMU. In connivance with the police and the local ruling Akali Dal bosses, they are inciting clashes in the villages and using the police for repression and for foisting false cases on the union activists. The police is acting as a convenient extension of the landlords' muscle power.

#### **Attitude towards the *jatt* landed peasantry**

One of the major problems that the PKMU leadership has to confront in handling its day-to-day activities and struggles is the correct handling of the contradictions between the *upper-caste landed peasant sections* and *low-caste agricultural labourers* and landless peasants. The complexity of the situation lies in the fact that the caste and class contradictions manifest themselves in an

intertwined form. In relation to the different layers of the rural landed sections, they are either overlapping or intersecting.

No doubt, the agricultural labourers and landless peasants are an inalienable part of the broad peasantry. The peasantry, in particular the poor and lower middle peasantry, as well as the rural labour, both are exploited by the feudal-imperialist combine. There is a basic unity of class interests among them while they differ on non-basic issues. These non-basic differences need to be handled in a friendly and non-antagonistic struggle among them. Owing to the lack of differentiation of the peasantry along distinct class interests, the dominance of the landlords on the peasants, and the lack of awareness of its class interests among the lower echelons of the peasantry, and taking advantage of the caste prejudices of the *jatt* landed peasant sections against the dalit labourers, the landlord and rich peasant minority succeeds in posing and portraying their class interests as the common interests of the peasant majority as a whole.

In this way, whenever a clash of interests between the landlords and the rural labour comes to the fore, the landlord and other feudal interests succeed in misleading and pitting the majority upper caste peasantry against the minority dalit labouring sections. This upper caste chauvinism triggers lower caste chauvinism among the dalit labouring sections. The casteist elements among the dalits, too, incite caste chauvinism. Hence the class contradiction between the landlords and labourers manifests itself in a perverted form of caste contradiction. The dalit labourers, due to lack of class awareness, often fail to distinguish between the wily landlords and the misled peasants.

In rural society, too often issues of dispute between the peasants and agricultural labour do crop up. If they are not handled properly, they take the form of violent clashes among them. The landlords, by misleading and rallying the peasants around themselves, foist social boycott ("*nakabandi*") on the dalit basti. The dalits are not allowed to enter the fields, even for easing themselves. The landlords, on such occasions, succeed in mobilising the peasantry by wantonly inciting the upper-caste arrogance of the landed *jatt* peasantry. Hence they succeed in concealing their ulterior class interests. The problem is: how to disrupt the mobilisation of the majority *jatt* peasantry against the minority dalit labour and landless

peasants? The emergence of some sort of *democratic* platform of the *jatt* peasantry can help breach the polarisation of the *jatt* peasantry along caste lines. This democratic platform needs most likely to be the democratic *class* organisation of the peasantry.

Keeping the above in view, the PKMU leadership has been making conscious and persistent efforts to project the unity of agricultural workers and the landed peasants and to establish a worker-peasant alliance. The PKMU has been making conscious efforts to launch joint struggles on common issues in alliance with the democratic peasant organisation. It has been pursuing a conscious policy of solving various problems between the two through mutual discussions. Whenever a situation of clash occurs, it has been deliberately avoiding any directing of the ire of the agricultural workers against the misled poor and middle peasants, and instead targetting the consciously chosen landlords and other feudal elements responsible for instigating the clash.

This conscious approach and attitude of the PKMU leadership has borne good fruits. In Nathana block of district Bathinda, the joint struggle of the PKMU and BKU (Ekta) helped not only in successfully concluding the struggle but also in softening the caste prejudices among the two sections of the broad peasantry. The participation of many upper-caste BKU activists in the final rites of the local PKMU leader was a vivid manifestation of this political change. In village Himmatpura of Moga district, the two organisations have been acting in close cooperation and they have fought many successful struggles on local issues. In Malout area, this conscious approach of the PKMU helped foil the attempts by some landlord elements to organise a boycott of the village dalits. In village Kokrikalan, in a dispute among the dalits and a section of the *jatt* peasantry, the local PKMU unit, instead of going to the police, consciously decided to approach the local unit of the BKU. It helped not only in winning over a sizeable section of the peasantry and avoiding a clash but also in isolating the landlord- and rich peasant-dominated panchayat.

#### **Assertion of their rights and identity**

Socially oppressed and economically exploited by higher classes and castes, the unorganised masses of the dalit rural labour and landless peasants have generally been forced to bear with all

excesses and indignities meted out to them. Now, with enhanced awareness of their rights and the emergence of their organisation as a means of assertion of their collective will, the situation is changing for the better.

Wherever the rural poor have organised and taken to the path of struggle, there may or may not be significant economic victories, but a discernable change takes place in the overall atmosphere of the dalit bastis. The imprint of their class unity is clearly visible on their faces. A sense of self-respect and self-confidence prevails among the ordinary labourers. The feeling of insecurity is decreasing. They have started asserting their rights with a growing awareness and self-confidence. They now unhesitatingly go to the offices, departments and police stations and engage the officials in discussions.

If a local PKMU leader is not allowed to catch fish from the common village pond on the pretext of the pond having been given on lease, and he dares demand one-third of the lease money as a rightful share of the village dalits from the sarpanch; if the sarpanch of village Manguwal dictates the village dalits to render free labour in some village developmental project and on their refusal abuses and insults them and the enraged dalits force him to seek public apology; these incidents, at first sight, may seem ordinary happenings. But they are in fact manifestations of the dalit labourers' growing self-confidence, courage, and conviction. Such "affrontery" on the part of low-caste agricultural labour was inconceivable earlier.

If rural labourers of village Jhorar unhesitatingly throng the police station in huge numbers and force the police officer to release their fellow labourer implicated in a false case of theft, the police officer pleads with them to pay for the food expenses incurred on the labourer during his confinement in the police station and the labourers instead of paying these expenses dare ask him to compensate for the labourer's lost wage days, it is not an usual happening. Similarly, if the agricultural labourers of village Himmatpura accompanied by the village peasants force the police to release there and then a detained village labourer, make the police officer guilty publicly apologise for beating him in police custody and extract Rs 300 as fine from the policeman, it is a testimony to their growing assertion.

This awareness and assertion was equally visible in an anti-liquor vend agitation of village Bhagtuana in Jaito sub-division. An agitated gathering of the village women, led by two girl activists of the PKMU, forced the local authorities to lock the liquor vend. A few days later, when the SDM, accompanied by a big posse of police force, visited the village to unlock the vend, he was gheraoed by the angry and agitated village people. When he wanted to unlock it on the plea of its legal sanction, the women shot back at him, "Be it legal or illegal, we have nothing to do with it. When the people of the village don't want it, we shall not allow it to be imposed on the people." When an irritated SDM refused to talk to the women activists and insisted on talking to some responsible person, the entire gathering retorted in one voice, "Only our women will have dialogue." The disgusted officer had to lick the dust. When he pleaded for a dialogue, a woman was quick to shout back, "Just wait! We are holding a meeting. We have no time now. When we visit you in your office, the way you often don't have time to listen to us, we, too, have no time." The SDM was helplessly waiting for the meeting to culminate. When he sought time to speak the gathering refused to listen to him by shouting slogans. He was released only after he agreed not to unlock the vend and promised to lift it altogether.

Many more such instances of the growing assertion of the rural poor can be cited. The PKMU has raised for instance the important issue of "right to information" regarding the allocation and expenditure of governmental funds for the rural poor.

Whereas the growing awareness and urge to struggle, resist and assert their rights is most welcome, there are some problems, too. At certain places, the local activists, exhilarated by their initial victories and growing strength, take on everything and everybody irrespective of the organisational situation, their own capacity, or the suitability of the issue just then; then they pressurise the leadership to take up struggle. At some places, they misuse their organisational authority to settle their personal scores, become arrogant, and impose their will on the fellow workers, dictating terms to them. Such tendencies need to be curbed. The leadership is faced with the trying task of educating and disciplining such impetuous elements without hurting their initiative and enthusiasm.

### Participation of women

Women constitute the most backward and oppressed section of our semi-feudal society. Apart from being victim to varying degrees of socio-economic domination and exploitation, like their male counterparts, they are subject to male domination and oppression as well. There are innumerable social taboos and inhibitions on their socio-economic and political activity which virtually force them to remain confined to their homes. But a somewhat different situation, of relatively less constriction, is prevalent in the case of rural dalit labouring women.

The harsh realities of the objective life of rural labouring classes necessitate the participation of dalit labouring women in income-generating economic activity. Tending the cattle and fetching fuel and fodder for the animals is their exclusive responsibility as also cooking food for the family and rearing of the children. Apart from this, they participate in numerous agricultural operations, such as transplanting paddy, plucking sunflower beans, hoeing of potatoes, weeding, harvesting and cotton picking. In some of these operations, women outnumber men. This economic activity on the part of women, on the one hand, has accelerated the process of their exploitation and enhanced the workload on them; on the other hand, it has contributed to the loosening of the feudal restrictions on them. It has decreased their dependence on the men and hence the male dominance on them as well. The agricultural labouring women constitute an integral and significant part of the rural labour of Punjab.

Taking note of the productive activity of rural labouring women and its significance, the PKMU has been consistently pursuing a policy of attracting and encouraging women's participation at all levels of the union's activity. The women have thus participated in huge numbers in all its activities. They have established beyond doubt that, in every aspect of activity -- such as initiative, daring, militancy, developing newer forms of struggle, confronting the police, officials and landlords, and even in vigilance and contributing to the defence of the organisation, as well as in providing leadership, they are inferior to none. Their valiant participation in these struggles reflects their intense class hatred, fighting calibre, courage and immense latent potential in many other fields.

During the prolonged and militant land agitation of village Balahar Vinjhu, they participated at each stage of the struggle. They participated in processions, organised sit-ins, gheraoed the police stations and police vehicles and forced the police to release arrested activists of the union. They even went for mobilisations in the neighbouring villages and addressed the meetings and shared their experiences.

To get an inkling of the militant fighting mood of the dalit rural women, an example may suffice. In village Kusa of district Moga, the persistent low voltage in power supply made the summer scorching heat in the mosquito-infested village unbearable. Enraged at the dilly-dallying tactics of the electricity department officials, the dalit women accompanied by some menfolk invaded the sub-division office, occupied the chair of the sub-divisional officer and sat on the table. They refused to vacate occupation of the office until the official consented to accompany them and restore proper power supply. The officer obliged and pleaded for arranging a vehicle to carry him and his staff to the village. The women flatly refused. He himself had to arrange the vehicle. When the vehicle came, they occupied all the seats. The SDO looked on helplessly. They were persuaded with great difficulty by the activists of the PKMU to vacate a seat for the SDO. At the village, the SDO was kept standing under the scorching sun till the power supply was restored.

The participation of women in union activities was not so spontaneous or easy an affair. The PKMU leadership had to face overt as well as covert stiff resistance from the sections of rural dalits with traditional feudal thinking. Whenever a gathering of the dalit labourers was called, the participation of their women in the gathering was vehemently resisted. The PKMU leaders had to impress upon them the significance of women's participation. They chose the patient way to make them understand by allowing them to learn through their own experience. The highly beneficial and helpful role played by the women during the struggles mollified the opposition to their participation. As a result, the mobilisation of women and children during all struggles and activities of the union has now become a tradition. The women regularly take part in all meetings and gatherings and even participate in huge numbers in all programmes in far-flung areas. In the strongholds of PKMU,

the women activists are members of the local leading committees. They participate in mobilisation work in other villages. But such cases are yet relatively isolated, and much remains to be done to make it a widespread phenomenon.

As far as the question of women's desired role in the organisation and collective life of agricultural workers is concerned, there is hardly any occasion to be complacent. A few initial steps have been taken in the right direction but much more remains to be done. The problem is acute. The serious problems which need to be confronted emanate from age-old anti-women values and traditions and their very lives. The participation of agricultural women workers in productive activity has only loosened to some extent the oppressive feudal inhibitions and hindrances on them, but of course they are not free from the prevalent male domination in this semi-feudal set-up. The women's participation at all levels of union activity is indispensable for their fuller contribution in the union affairs, for their own development, as well as for the development and strengthening of their organisation. The feudalistic value-system is the biggest hindrance in the men accepting the women as their leaders. To enable the women activists to contribute to their maximum capacity and capability in the organisational activities, their relative freeing from the tiring burden of cooking, rearing of the children and taking care of other household chores is a must. The problem cannot be solved immediately. Only by waging protracted ideological-political struggle against the feudal outlook and value system and the objective requirements posed by the revolutionary movement of these sections would pave the way for the ever-increasing participation of the women in the revolutionary movement.

#### **Demands and issues**

In the scarcity-ridden harsh lives of agricultural labourers, there are issues galore. But the most pressing issues include a piece of land for cultivation, a dwelling for living, an end to social and caste oppression and discrimination, and a decent wage for their agricultural wage labour.

The agricultural labourers and landless dalit peasants have an insatiable craving for land. Talk to any dalit landless, the very



mention of land will make his eyes glow. Landlessness haunts them the most when an arrogant *jatt* farmer orders their womenfolk collecting hay for their cattle to get out of their fields, abusing and insulting them while doing so. Or when the *jatt* peasants forbid their entry into their fields at the time of a dispute between the peasants and workers, even for easing themselves. What a torment!

At the present level of development of the Khet Mazdoor Union, however, apart from being a partial issue of occasional struggle, land is not an issue of immediate struggle but is an issue of political propaganda and agitation. However, its importance need not be minimised. It is not only the most significant basic issue for the landless peasants and agricultural labourers. It also constitutes an issue of basic demarcation between the genuine and fake protagonists of the interests of the dalit rural labouring classes.

Another burning and significant issue for the rural dalit labourers is that of acute caste and social oppression and discrimination. A glaring example (already mentioned above) of this oppression and tyranny was presented by the tyrant landlord of village Manawan near Zira town when he pronounced heavy penalties through his private court and then tortured two agricultural labourers to death. The police repression often is a mere extension of the feudal oppression. The rural feudal classes, too often, utilise the police for preserving their class and caste domination. A landlord of Kular village, who owns 3,000 acres of land, let loose a reign of terror on his own tenants to evict them. During this process, the landlord was mysteriously murdered. Later, the police implicated the tenants falsely in this murder case. The goons of the landlord, in the very presence of the police, demolished the houses of the tenants and all other evidence showing their occupation of the land. It is a glaring example of the police repression as an extension of the feudal-landlord oppression. Innumerable examples of beating and abusing of tenants and labourers by upper-caste higher classes blight daily life in rural society. Myriad forms of caste discrimination make their lives a living hell. It is one of the most burning issues leading to clashes in the rural society.

Increase in wages commensurate with the rising prices of daily necessities is another important issue for the dalit agricultural labourers. But it generally evokes a sharp reaction from the rural landlords. Indeed, the utter helplessness of the peasantry -- about rising prices of agri-inputs like diesel oil, fertilisers, pesticides, agri-machinery, etc, about coping with the crop diseases, about natural or not-so-natural calamities, etc, and in resisting the exploitation by foreign multinational and big trading companies, commission-agents and corrupt officials -- bursts out in desperation on the wage-workers when they demand higher wages.

Each day the wage market is deteriorating for the sellers of labour power. Many factors have contributed to this deterioration. First, the introduction on a massive scale of labour-replacing agricultural machinery has generated large unemployment. Secondly, the influx of hordes of pauperised peasant migrants from other parts of the country at peak seasons renders wage bargaining impossible. Thirdly, the decreasing crop yields as a result of innumerable crop diseases, too, depress wages. And lastly, the state of unorganisation of the agricultural labour makes impossible any collective bargaining for wage rise. So, a rural wage worker hardly gets work for 90 to 120 days throughout the year; and the wages are much too inadequate to meet his or her minimum requirements.

Three types of issues are the most prominent as immediate prominent issues of struggle and activity by agricultural workers:

The first and most pervasive type of issues pertains to democratic struggles against casteist arrogance, intimidation, discrimination, high-handedness, excesses, and misbehaviour with women.

The second type of issues for immediate activity pertains to increase in and proper distribution of social welfare funds and other governmental advances such as grants for houses, community centres, pensions for the aged and widows, loans and subsidised food etc.

The third type relates to propaganda and agitational issues such as distribution of land, residential plots, and improvement in working conditions of the agricultural labourers as well as wage increases etc.

Finally, there are political mobilisation campaigns on various issues and there are cultural programmes.

During the past three years, the PKMU has organised many struggles and mobilisations on these issues on different occasions on these issues. A detailed report of these activities is beyond the scope of this article. However, some important struggles can be recollected.

As an example of the most important issue for the PKMU, the memorable struggle for land in village Balahar Vinjhu tops the list. The village dalits had been cultivating nearly 18 acres of "nazool" land (reserved for dalits) since a long time. The village sarpanch and his coterie, in connivance with a Congress minister, hatched a conspiracy to usurp this land at throw-away prices through governmental auctioning of this land. The village dalits waged a prolonged and bitter struggle against their evictions and for the ownership and distribution of this land among the dalits. They had to face severe police repression besides attacks of the goondas. But all this repression failed to crush the resistance of the dalit labourers. Though the authorities succeeded in auctioning the land in a closed-door auction under heavy police protection, they failed to evict the tenants and take control of the disputed land. A legal battle is still going on. This struggle was widely reported in the press and it projected the issue of land distribution throughout Punjab.

In Nawan Shahar district of Doaba region of Punjab, the PKMU took up for struggle the issue of residential plots for the dalit agricultural labourers. After a determined and prolonged struggle, the PKMU succeeded in getting residential plots in village Manguwal. (The market value of this land is above Rs 40 lakh.) The struggle for such residential plots in Rasoolpur and some other villages is still going on. Similarly, in village Majri near Khanna town, after a tenacious struggle the union succeeded in getting panchayat land for an open latrine space for the rural dalit women. In village Doda of district Muktsar, the repeated attempts of an influential wealthy family to evict a number of labouring families of the *baazigar* community (a scheduled tribe) from a piece of land were foiled through a long and determined struggle by PKMU. In village Malsian of Jalandhar district, the union foiled attempts of the hirelings of an Akali MP (an erstwhile

Congress leader) to grab the precious village common land and confiscated the bricks of the boundary wall that he had got erected to grab the land.

A striking example of the struggle against feudal repression was the one in village Manawan in district Ferozepore against the torturing to death of two agricultural labourers by a cruel landlord. The wicked landlord attempted to pass off this gruesome murder as a case of pesticide poisoning. He spent lakhs of rupees in bribing the police, the doctors, the press correspondents, the newspaper managements, the police, civil and judicial authorities at the district level, and even the pliant and corrupt leaderships of the parliamentary parties and mass organisations. He launched a counter-propaganda offensive to vilify the struggle-leaders. He is a living terror in the area and he holds his private court in the village where he imposes fines and other punishments on the villager.

On the other hand, the murder of the agricultural labourers unleashed the pent-up fury of the masses in a spontaneous mass upsurge against the accused landlord. A joint action committee of various sections and mass organisations was formed to conduct the struggle. At each step, be it a matter of conducting the post-mortem, registration of murder case, arrest of the accused, production of the accused in a court, his hand-cuffing, foiling his bail attempts sought on cooked-up false pleas or tampering with the *challan*, etc, the action committee had to battle it out with the police and civil authorities collaborating with the influential accused. Massive processions, gheraos of the police station, traffic hold-ups were organised umpteen times to make the authorities move at each point. A rare and unprecedented gherao of the district courts was also organised by nearly 700 men and women to protest against releasing the culprit on bail. The PKMU was the star mobiliser throughout this glorious struggle. Apart from incurring heavy expenditure on mobilisation throughout the agitation, it rendered 40 quintals of wheat and Rs 7,500 cash as a fraternal support to the joint action committee. The struggle is still going on.

The PKMU undertook many struggles to challenge and change the medieval service conditions of the contract farm labour. In one such case, in village Bhagtuana, a contract labourer died of

pesticide poisoning after prolonged illness. The rapacious landlord not only refused to pay for the treatment expenses, but exerted pressure on the labourer's family to pay the fabricated dues. He threatened to take away the cattle as well as usurp their house. The union refused flatly to pay even a single penny to the landlord. It issued leaflets challenging this inhuman medieval practice and took up the struggle. The landlord managed police raids which were foiled by the organised labouring families. In another instance, from village Kusa, a self-respecting contract farm labourer, weary of daily humiliation and insolent behaviour of the landlord, refused to work with him after a few months of a contract agreement. The landlord insisted on full repayment of the contract money and took away the buffalo of the labourer forcibly. The union pressurised him not only to return his buffalo but also pay for the work done by the contract labourer. Similarly, a rich peasant near Samrala was pressurised to pay Rs 30,000 as compensation money to the family of a labourer who died of pesticide poisoning while working in his fields.

The PKMU organised propaganda campaigns to expose the so-called social welfare schemes and the political interference and corruption involved in them. By organising struggles on these issues, the union pressurised the concerned authorities to settle various cases relating to pensions for the aged and the widows, grants for the houses, flood relief and issuance of yellow cards for the families below the poverty line. Thus in village Himmatpura, pension dues worth Rs 1.5 lakh were distributed. Similarly in areas like Nakodar, Banga, Khanna, Samrala, Moga and Muktsar, the union helped settle numerous cases concerning yellow cards, house grants and flood relief.

Last but not least, the PKMU undertook, on different occasions, political mobilisation campaigns. One such political mobilisation campaign was organised by the PKMU during the state assembly elections of February 1997, when rural labourers and landless peasants responded overwhelmingly and participated in the "Inquilab Zindabad! Rally" organised by Lok Morcha Punjab at Moga. It reflected their widespread disillusionment with the vote-parties as well as vote politics and their identification with democratic revolutionary politics. This inference was again corroborated when the rural labouring sections responded to the

call of observing the martyrdom day of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and his comrades and took oaths to continue the fight to realise the dreams of those national martyrs.

Various other activities were also undertaken by the PKMU as contributed in expanding and consolidating the union. As a result, the PKMU has acquired a good mobilisation capacity and a sound foothold among the rural dalit sections which will help it face the onslaught of reactionary ruling classes with determination and courage.

## Letter to the Editor

I have read *The Comrade* no. 4 in which the analysis of the international situation and the spineless state of the compradors has been depicted correctly.

The fall of Soviet social-imperialism has given a political death blow to the revisionist parties of all countries of the world. The so-called left parties of India too are in trouble. It is very difficult for them to maintain their party-existence. Because, the left parties of India depict the social imperialist as upholder of Marxism-Leninism, and so support every anti-people activity of the social imperialist as revolutionary. Now, with the fall of social imperialism, the political bankruptcy of the left parties of India has been exposed to the people.

In these circumstances, communist revolutionaries should try to win over the rank and file of these parties. *The Comrade* has correctly drawn our attention to this point. In fact, the rank and file of the revisionist parties are responding to our approach slowly but steadily.

Moreover, the new economic policy has revealed the revisionists' wrong understandings about neo-colonial exploitation. The wrong understandings are (i) India has got independence (ii) It has an independent foreign policy, (iii) India can progress independent of foreign monopoly capital, (iv) India's big bourgeoisie are at liberty to take decisions on economic policies as the bourgeoisie has bargaining power, (v) This big bourgeoisie has tariff protection, which is an indicator of an independent country, etc.

All of these fantastic assumptions have already been shattered miserably. Now, they are caught in a death-trap. Actually, our parliamentary left parties think superficially in terms of matter instead of realising the inner-essence of the matter. For example, they brand Tata, Birla as national bourgeoisie. If they had tried to understand the inner-essence of every big industry run by Tata, Birla they would have found that these bourgeoisie are in close touch with imperialists, ie they are harboured and nurtured by foreign monopoly capital.

Besides, bureaucratic capital is performing an important role. This bureaucratic capital is in service of the big bourgeoisie at the cost of common people. It would have been better if *The Comrade* had pointed out, by way of example, as to how bureaucratic capital is looting our

common people. I can cite a few examples as to how bureaucratic capital is in close touch with the big bourgeoisie at the cost of the common people. In 1988, the nationalised banks had shown their net profit to be Rs 250 crore, while the gross profit was Rs 750 crore. There was thus a great gap between gross and net profit, because a large sum of money had to be kept aside and spent in paying bad debts. It is customary for bank accounts not to mention the amount of money spent for bad debts. In 1986, Central Bank's gross profit was Rs 75 crore but its net profit was shown to be Rs 24 crore. Rs 35 crore was spent for bad debts. In 1989 Central Bank's gross profit was Rs 77 crore but net profit was shown in the account as Rs 13 crore. Rs 25 crore was kept aside for bad debts and Rs 12 crore were spent for loan which would not be repaid. In 1992, all the nationalised banks made a profit of Rs 750 crore, of which 70 per cent was kept reserve for either bad debts or non-repayment of loan (source: *A Report to the Nation* by Gurudas Dasgupta). I do not want to lengthen the list.

As regards "Our Legacy", it is inspiring; in fact, we are learning history anew. Especially, the struggle of South Vietnam for national salvation is exemplary. I wish that *The Comrade* should continue to publish "Our Legacy".

As regards Lok Morcha of Punjab, the activities of Lok Morcha have drawn our attention, unlike all other parliamentary organisations. Lok Morcha is performing a herculean task in shaping the people's mind in respect of India's so-called democracy and the character of Parliament. I think, the lesson of Lok Morcha should be followed. A wind of change, I hope, must be turned into a gust of wind which will wipe out the revisionist and reactionary class root and branch.

Finally, I want to say about Malkangiri Adivasi Sangh. Malkangiri Adivasi Sangh is inventing new forms of struggle with every passing day. Now they are utilising social boycott as weapon which was previously used by the exploiters. Actually, the Sangh is trying to mobilise as many people as possible against the exploiters. I have read in *The Comrade* no. 3 their heroic struggle which is a morale-boost not only to the Sangh but also to the rest of the country. I believe heart and soul that if mass movements flourish all over India, then Malkangiri will first establish Red rule in our country in the years to come. So, all of us should support this movement enthusiastically on the one hand, and expand mass movements all over the country on the other hand.

With revolutionary greetings,

29/3/97

A reader, West Bengal.