

*A Pair Of Hands Without Work...*

## **An Appeal to the Civil Society**

Thousands of factories are locked out. And they remain closed. Lakhs of workers go jobless. Their skill and experience come of no use to the society. They eke out a meagre living just to scrape a meal at the end of the day. It is the end of weekly or monthly wages – end of social security. What starts is a struggle for them to keep alive.

Workers of legal industrial closures lose their jobs but are paid their dues. A locked-out factory implies unpaid legal dues. Workers need to fight for the settlement of their dues. How are they to find time in midst of their struggle for survival? PF, gratuity, outstanding wages, unpaid bonus – and the list goes on. Unheard any more are the ear shattering slogans of workers unity. The padlock on the factory gate symbolises the end of their identity as organised labour. They are the workers of locked out industries – and there are none to even think about them. Two, five, ten years – even after fifteen years their legal dues remain unpaid. They are not covered by health insurance – most lack proper shelter – education for their children is a tough ask – no food support from the State for these genuinely urban-poor.

Factories get locked up but the laws of the land remain active. The fate of the workers comes under the auction hammer. With sworn undertakings to reopen it from the bidders, the unit changes hand as an ‘ongoing’ concern at a throwaway price. Workers view this transiently as a silver lining. However the gates remain shut – the locks gather rust. Then the next phase starts. At night first, then in broad daylight, the machinery, materials and spares and the finished product are removed. One by one the water pipeline, the electric wiring, even the last nuts and bolts vanish. The skeleton remains, only to be covered by overgrown creepers. The new ‘industrialist’, the old leader, the police, remains proactive and enterprising. Then the junk dealers, the bulldozers and the realtors step in conveniently. Residential apartment blocks come up in a hurry. The workers still have unpaid legal dues!

It is story-like but not fiction! Hundreds of such apartments come up while lakhs of such workers remain deprived. This and the lack of any strong protest are both realities. There seems to be no breakthrough of this paradigm. At places where the workers throw up a semblance of resistance the factory remains a graveyard for two decades or more. After that only a

few workers are expected to survive making things that much more easier. These days the State Government is showing a strange dynamism by 'resuming' the land on which these locked out factories stand. It is to be seen whether the State Government is pro-labour enough to settle the outstanding legal dues of the workers before offering the piece of land to someone else. It is also to be seen whether the State Government would use industrial land for fresh industrial purposes, as per its avowed principles, or would use it differently.

We strongly believe that time has come to address the civil society in order to mobilise support for and built up an opinion in favour of these hapless workers on this issue. Civil Society has never ever accepted such one-way deprivation for long. In the past, issues had been floated, demands formulated and as a consequence of civil society pressure, things have changed for the better. We do not believe that workers/employees have ever been granted any right without any pressure. And here the civil society has a definite role to play. It has indeed done justice to its role in innumerable instances in the past. Today, the workers of locked out industries are all alone in this fast moving world. It is unimaginably difficult for them to reunite and fight on their own for their rights. Stark deprivation exists but we are still optimistic since the Civil Society has always raised its voice against such unfair treatment meted out to a section, which is a constituent of the same society. Optimism makes us active!

We have formulated some demands during our interactions with the workers whom we have seen to suffer. Many of these demands, may we mention, do not need any huge budgetary allocation. Hence we are certain that if the Civil Society puts its weight behind the justified demands of these workers of locked out industries, the Government can, with ease, add value to the lives of these socially challenged. After all these are the ones who genuinely need the Government!

During the last fifteen days the campaign trail has seen intense activism. The last seven days our tableau rolled for 12 hours a day on an average. Two-dozen meetings in industrial and urban hubs have been attended with zest.

Somehow we can feel that you too would come and join the 'Bhukha Michhil' on Sunday, 1 May 2005 at 2pm from College Square. The Rally will pass through Bidhan Sarani, Vivekananda Road, Maniktala, Sealdah, Moulali and end with a meeting at Subodh Mullick Square.

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