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India

The struggle against private electricity suppliers and illegitimate tariff hikes

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By the time this statement reaches people, a group of activists united under the banner of the Peoples Movement Against Power Tariff Hike will have entered the fourteenth day of their hunger strike. The network at present is small, and there could well be debates about some of the tactics it has taken. Some remarks in social media tend to show that such debates about purity are taking place.

It is therefore necessary to examine the issue from a clearly socialist point of view. The campaign was initiated due to an action that has been taking place almost every year. The Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation announces, with the consent of the Electricity Regulatory Commission, revisions of rates. Not only does it do so almost every year, but it announces rate hikes with retrospective effect. In other words, after people have consumed power and have even paid the bill, as they thought, they are informed later that they must pay more because the rate is being increased from an earlier date. The success of neoliberalism has meant that all major parties, from right to left, have accepted that certain market linked principles cannot be questioned by elected governments. Indeed, they feel that it is the duty of elected governments to support certain particular forces.

The CESC is one of several power suppliers in India owned by private companies. And the logic of private companies is that they must make a profit, not only some profit, but profit at the highest possible rate. So, while the Electricity Act gives governments to override the State Regulatory Commissions in the public interest, the reality is that it does not happen. For many years in West Bengal, for example, the Goenka owned CESC has been imposing and collecting arrears in this way, regardless of whether the CPI(M) led Left Front or the TMC had been in power.

While the people who came together might be a small number, what they have done after a long time, is to challenge the consensus that says, profits first, do not challenge the rights of monopoly capital. In this, their action is similar to other small or medium scale actions. For example we can mention the case of the Asongothito Kshetra Sangrami Sramik Mancha organising a campaign for minimum wages for a whole series of sectors in West Bengal back in 2011, shortly after the TMC government was formed and the bourgeois media were heralding the end of the left. Equally as another example, we can talk of a small Union, the Progressive Plantation Workers Union early this year, opposing the rotten agreement in the tea gardens. None of these show a dramatic shift away from the mainstream left. But they all are straws in the wind, that new forces are beginning to come out and question the neo-liberal consensus.

This is of course not specific to West Bengal, or even to India. There are various developments, all of which show working people seeking alternatives. In some cases they have emerged. In other cases there might have been expectations belied. Such for example was the broad party building exercise in Greece. In other cases, apparently dead organisations have seen revival, as with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party. It would be argued that we are comparing totally different issues. We say, we are pointing to a trend, where some people, everywhere, are beginning to challenge the neoliberal consensus that Margaret Thatcher made famous as TINA (there is no alternative). As of now, the challenges in India are small – much smaller than some of the European examples we have cited. The mainstream left still dominates the working class, and unlike the trade unions, which have sometimes taken up serious fights, the left parties have a totally spineless attitude. Yet, the fact that in the first half of September, the Left Front also decided to get into the act, shows that while the small forces may not be strong enough to launch and sustain movements where hundreds of thousands of people really join the fight, they are already in a position where they can make masses of people aware, and compel the mainstream left to take periodic actions.

This immediately brings up tactical questions which we from outside a particular campaign cannot address in full, yet

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which do need discussions. The mainstream left cannot be totally ignored, as long as they exist. The sectarian stance is to simply abuse them and turn one's back on them. This is good for purity, but this means imposing a limit on how large a movement will eventually be built.

On the other hand, to merge banners is to ensure that the mainstream left will step in, steal the issue, and then make a rotten compromise. There is a need to retain one's organisational independence, which in turn calls for a political clarification and the raising of one's banner; while at the same time agreeing to specific, limited, united front actions.

If the demands are such that the action emboldens the masses and lead to further militancy, such united fronts serve toiling people and should be promoted. But there cannot be a unity that leads to the surrender of the banner of revolutionaries and of militant fighters, since given the relation of forces even now, despite its continuous bloodletting, shows a far greater numerical strength of the reformist left. Our goal must be, not just a token show of force or even a token concession. In the field of power, the issues and demands must involve the following:

- Â· Questioning the logic of periodic hikes altogether
- Â· Scrapping the retrospective effects of power hike
- Â· Questioning why private companies must be given such crucial public utilities, especially when they do not even produce but mostly buy and supply the power
- Â· Demanding the expansion of solar, wind power

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