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50 days of NREGA Workers' Protest for 100 Days of Work Stony Silence from the Government of India

Press Release- 13th April 2023

NREGA Sangharsh Morcha(NSM) held a press conference at the Press Club of India, New Delhi on 13th April 2023 to mark 50 days of the peaceful dharna by NREGA workers from across the country. The ongoing dharna is in response to the various mechanisms by which the statutes of the NREGA have been subverted by the Union government. The right to work and the right to timely wages under NREGA fructify Article 21 of the Constitution of India. As such, violations of NREGA's provisions are a breach of the Constitution and are tantamount to massive human rights violations. For instance, the Union government has not released any funds, more than Rs 7,500 cr, to West Bengal from 26th December, 2021 by arbitrarily using Section 27. Wages amounting to Rs 2,762 crores of workers in West Bengal remain pending.

At the press conference, we released

- a letter that has been sent to the Finance Minister concerning budget cuts, violations of rights due to needless technology interventions such as the NMMS app based attendance system and the Aadhaar based payments system (ABPS)
- 50 worker testimonies on violations of rights due to NMMS and ABPS.
- Ministry of Finance's own memorandum admitting to shortage of funds leading to wage delays.
- A report of 18 lakh wage transactions that demonstrates how ABPS payments take the same time as regular account-based payments. ABPS have problems such as diverted payments and misdirected payments that are unique to ABPS.
- Case study demonstrating evidence of how two women lost their whole life savings owing to misdirections due to ABPS.

Raj Shekhar, the national coordinator of the Right to Food Campaign initiated the discussion by outlining the immense challenges faced by NSM in organising the dharna for 50 days. By underscoring the shrinking space for democratic engagement he said that "the space for peaceful protest in the national capital has been barricaded to just 100 metres. It has been harrowing to get police permissions 10 days in advance for each day's protest using different organisational letterheads." At the protest site today, Hindu Mahasabha held a protest to build a Hindu Rashtra where protestors were allowed to come in with swords. Alluding to such discriminatory legalism, the moderator, Rajendran Narayanan, faculty, Azim Premji University, added, " On the contrary, NSM workers faced a lot of difficulty in bringing puppets to the dharna site."

Sulochana Devi, a NREGA worker from Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh, spoke about the everyday difficulty in using the NMMS app at NREGA worksites and how, this in conjunction with abysmally low wages are discouraging her from doing NREGA work. She said "in the paper-based muster roll attendance system, we had complete knowledge about the number of days we worked. But now with the NMMS app,

it is unclear whether our attendance has been marked. Recently, although I worked for 7 days, my attendance was captured only for 2 days. Despite working from 9 AM to 5PM, I only got wages at the rate of Rs 80 per day instead of Rs 212 per day. Ideally, the NREGA wages should at least be Rs 400 per day." Following this, the economist, Dipa Sinha, presented the larger economic context of overall cuts in social sector spending leading to these protests and said that "accounting for inflation, rural wages have actually declined in recent years." Countering the Union government's claims that there have been budget cuts due to low demand, she said that "introduction of these new technologies are decreasing transparency, making it harder for workers and is a roundabout way to kill the programme." Lalitaben Badia, a NREGA worker from Panchmahal district, Gujarat, narrated the harrowing accounts of 8 women from her village whose payments were misdirected to somebody else's account owing to their Aadhaar getting linked to somebody else's bank account. After several months of running around, spending nearly Rs 2,000 to retrieve their wages of Rs 2,200, only 4 of the 8 women could partially retrieve their misdirected wages. In separate cases, she narrated how the payments of some workers got diverted to a different account owing to confusions around Aadhaar linking with loan accounts. They had to spend more than Rs 4,000 over a period of 4 months before they could resolve the matter. Throughout the process, they had no support from any officials. She strongly condemned the ABPS system and demanded to revert to account-based payments systems.

Following the powerful exposition of Lalitaben Badia, Neeta Hardikar of Anna Suraksha Abhiyan, Gujarat, highlighted how women have repeatedly expressed that NREGA is the safest work option for them. Alluding to budget cuts, she said "by reducing the NREGA budget, the government is compromising on women's safety. Moreover, budget cuts result in insufficient staff to implement when there are many vacancies. This leads to unreasonable expectations from the field officials and forces the staff to engage in corruption." The four time ex Member of Parliament, Hannan Mollah, was the last speaker. He condemned the Union government's apathy for the working class on how the government is killing the programme on the pretext of digitisation and modernisation. By reprimanding the media on its poor coverage of the poor, "the media has totally failed to capture the extent of this issue, and even the protests which have risen against it." Extending solidarity with the NSM dharna he said "We have to force the government to listen like with the farmers' protests, which simply did not stop until the government was forced to cave to the farmers' demands. "

As the Union government remains silent, the dharna continues with the following immediate demands.

1. Substantially increasing the budget allocation to meet the work demand and ensure timely payment of wages.
2. Immediately release all the pending payments to West Bengal.
3. Revoke the NMMS app.
4. Do not make ABPS mandatory to make NREGA wage payments.

Annexures: (1) Letter to the Finance Minister (2) 50 worker testimonies showing violations of rights (3) Ministry of Finance Memorandum (4) Report released in 2021 demonstrating wage delays and analysis of ABPS and account-based payments