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“If We Do Not Rise...” The Campaign for Rights

Labourfile News Network



Hum agar uthhe nahin toh... (If we do not rise...) Today, 5 September 2020, will see the launch of a unique campaign—a campaign aimed at uniting voices against the targeted attack on the constitutional rights of the people of India. This campaign, a collective effort of more than 500 women’s groups, LGBTQIA collectives and human rights organisations from 28 states, is coming together for a day of resistance, online, to highlight the urgent need to safeguard the Indian Constitution and its values.

Addressing a virtual press conference on 27 August 2020, the organisers spoke in detail about the current contingencies the people of India are facing. A number of prominent social activists and representatives of national networks and organisations such as Anjali Bhardwaj (SNS), Shabnam

Hashmi (ANHAD), Annie Raja (NFIW), Dr. Syeda Hameed (former Member of Planning Commission), Mariam Dhawale (AIDWA), Kavita Krishnan (AIPWA), Abirami Jotheeswaran (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch), Abha Bhaiya (One Billion Rising), Meera Sanghmitra (NAPM), Aruna Gnanadason (Indian Christian Women's Movement), Nandini Rao and Leena Dabiru spoke on the occasion.

Talking to the media, Anjali Bhardwaj (SNS) said that the main objective of the campaign is to highlight the threat to India's democracy and our Constitution, and to question the government and hold it accountable. The speakers highlighted that there have been moves to dilute laws that protect women, in the name of mitigating COVID-19, revealing the anti-women stance of the regime. The speakers reiterated that the campaign is an initiative to safeguard constitutional values and principles. Women and LGBTQIA persons have been at the forefront of this movement.

Why this Campaign?

The campaigners emphatically pointed out that there is need to rise, need to raise our collective voices, in the context of:

- the systematic erosion and collapse of democratic institutions such as the Parliament and the judiciary in the country.
- the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) being pushed through the Parliament, to destroy the secular fabric of India's Constitution by making religion a basis for Indian citizenship.
- the widespread corruption, lack of transparency in election funding, constant dilution of the Right to Information Act that has hit at the fundamental democratic right of citizens to question the government and hold it accountable.
- the New Education Policy, riddled with several problems, that seeks to ensure greater centralisation, communalisation and commercialisation of the education system.
- the attack on minorities and the attempt to spread communal hatred and divide people on religious lines.
- the attack on freedom of speech and expression, labelling activists, journalists and academics engaged in various movements as anti-national and silencing their genuine voices with threats of jail and UAPA (2019).

Hence, this idea of a collective campaign was mooted.

The Impact on the Working Class

The speakers reflected on how the COVID-19 crisis has been turned into an opportunity by the current regime to dilute and destroy laws protecting workers' rights. Annie Raja of NFIW pointed out that at a time when the pandemic prevents people from protesting in large numbers, the government is busy privatising public sector units that belong to India's people, seeking to destroy the Environmental Impact Assessment processes thereby facilitating the plunder of our rivers, forests and land, and proposing adverse changes to agrarian policies. Kavita Krishnan of AIPWA reflected on the government's quick move in making amendments to labour laws—those that were achieved after long-long struggle of the working class. The unplanned and harsh lockdown, imposed to combat the pandemic, resulted in economic devastation and instant cessation of all income-earning opportunities for millions, leading to unemployment, hunger and destitution among the working poor, especially migrant workers. The speakers recollected the heart-rending reports and images of migrants walking for hundreds of kilometres, often carrying children. The speakers emphasised that the COVID-19 crisis has further exposed the apathetic and anti-poor nature of the current regime.

The Modus Operandi

As part of the campaign, thousands of individuals and groups will come together across the country, to raise their voice on the issues mentioned both on-line and on the ground. They will:

- Make and share short videos on various social media platforms

- Hold live Facebook sessions
- Create and circulate posters, animation films, memes, songs and performances on social media
- Gather in small groups with placards and slogans while observing physical distancing norms
- Submit memoranda on different issues to local authorities

As part of the campaign, factsheets have been released on various subjects, including violence against women, transgender people, health, participation of women in politics, migrant workers, women farmers and sex workers.

The campaigners reminisced how activists, journalists and academics engaged in various movements are now languishing in jails, without access to the legal provision of bail; and how women like Gauri Lankesh had to pay with their life for exercising their fundamental right to speech and expression; how the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (2019) has been amended and used to implicate dissenters and arrest them. They made an earnest plea to citizens from all walks of life—artistes, intellectuals, academicians and like-minded, concerned individuals—to take active part in the campaign.