

"MINES, MECHANISATION AND PEOPLE"

Rapporteur's report on the Third Annual Convention of
People's Union for Democratic Rights, held on Nov.
12, 1983. - - - - -

In the Bailadila iron ore mine, in 1978, at one stroke 10,000 people become jobless. The workers fought a tragic but heroic battle in which they lost their lives, their women were raped, their huts were burned down and above all they lost their bread. The workers of Dalli-Rajhara raised a protest and vowed that they would not allow machines to devour their likes. Today, the Bhilai Steel Plant management has been compelled to restrict the Dalli mine to a semi-mechanised one. The hardy tribals of South Singhbhum sangh and danced in defiance of the SAIL management for ten hungry days. They forced the top brass of SAIL to implement the Supreme Court order for making wage payment and giving other benefits. Today, these 5000 tribals face starvation because the mechanised Meghataburu iron ore project that they have created has no place for unskilled tribals and their original occupation (Cultivation) has been destroyed. Mechanisation in Mines is grounds of production and exports. What it means to the already miserable lives of tribals in backward forest regions has been no concern of those who are responsible for it.

It is PUDR's concern that at least those who are not responsible for mechanisation should be concerned about the repression in mining areas. They should also be aware of the causes of the social conflict in these regions, the impact of mechanisation on the lives of the local inhabitants and the effects in terms of environment by mining of the region

It is in this context that the Third Annual convention of PUDR was held. The activists of at least three mining areas felt the need for a dialogue between them and the intellectuals who were concerned with the question of mechanisation in mines. PUDR on its part has in the past investigated into many incidents in mining areas and has brought to light the origins of social conflict in these areas. The President of the organisation, Gobinda Mukhoty, pointed out in the opening remarks that the discussion should focus on the relevance of large scale mechanisation and the efficiency of mechanisation in relation to the large investments, in particular the investments in imported machinery and technology. "Economic back ground of a social conflict", theme paper was presented by Subba Rao on behalf of PUDR. The paper pointed out that the State Policy, of the mechanisation has been seriously and rapidly affecting iron ore mines and it is here that the people's resistance is seen the most, as in the cases of Chattisgarh, Bailadilla, Koonjhar and Meghataburu. There has been an unmistakable trend towards mechanisation in iron ore mining in India. This

trend, however, cannot be explain merely in terms of technical or economic reasons such as exports output, cost, etc. while mechanisation has not given benefits in an unqualified man what it has taken away it has done so with impunity. It has reduced employment, especially that of women, it has created social inequalities between skilled and unskilled labour, it has endangered the environment and above all has lead to a lot more of foreign dependence. In the light of all this the growing mechanisation cannot be attributed to the pious objectives of national development. It certainly has been promoted by the vested interests within or outside government. And, more so, by foreign powers, who are benefiting by dumping their machines here and getting cheap iron ore. These political factors encourage the growth of mechanisation without regard for the lives of the people. Naturally, the response of the people is also political. Herein lies the social origin of the democratic movement in mining regions.

Four other short papers were circulated on behalf of PUDR. The first paper is titled "Mechanisation and planning in iron ore - a comedy of errors". The paper stresses that the two instances of Megahatuburu and Donimalai show that huge investments, under-utilisation of capacities, have lead to high costs and decline in employment. It also points out the various problems of the iron ore sector - wrong targets, dumping of fines, imbalances in infrastructural facilities - all in the context of the "misplaced eagerness to open large mechanised iron ore mines in the country". A note, "The Woman, the machine and the Trade Union", showed as to how mechanisation hits women's employment the worst. The popular myths about the inefficiency of women are propagated by the management and even Trade Unions have not helped the situation. Another paper highlighted the fact that thoughtless planning had led to the unemployment of several thousand workers in the Keonjhar iron ore mines. The note on environmental impact of mining concludes - "the

environmental impact of mining is seen in a variety of ways (social & ecological) but if the intensity of mining is greater the impact is greater. Although the impact of mechanisation is not uniform it decisively has a greater impact. The solution to the environmental problem lies in collective (union) action".

The simple tribals of South Singhbhum do not grasp the implications that mechanisation and mining has had on their lives. This was pointed out in a paper presented by Xavier Dias of Saranda Thekka Mazdoor Sangh, Singhbhum, Bihar. At first they gave up their age

old lands and then were converted in 'Coolie proletariats'. They were spellbound by the powerful machine and could not react. Now mechanisation is posing a new threat - that of starvation. As yet, they are unable to grasp this. In the region, agriculture has been neglected so that cheap labour may be available for construction. Once the mechanised mine is opened these very labourers are left to fend for themselves. This situation is made worse by the fact that all the small sources of water for irrigation have been diverted to the mines. Meghatuburu alone needs 20,000 liters per day even before commencing production. The waste of these mines form "lalpani" (red oxide) and pollute the agricultural lands and drinking water sources. Of the 5000 workers in Meghatuburu 45% are women. They are the most hardhit by mechanisation because none of them are skilled. The modernisation that has been introduced has not changed the feudal character of the barons of the mines in the private sector and public sector mines alike. There is no respect for the civil rights of workers. Four casual workers were tied to a jeep, dragged for half a K.M., tied upside down and beaten till one of them died. In spite of a writ petition filed by contract workers of Meghatuburu they continue to receive their daily wages under the guns of Bihar Armed Police. Finally, it was pointed out that no Trade Union, left or right, has taken it on to educate about the dangers of mechanisation. The paper concluded that "only through a militant trade union movement linked and supported by the rural proletariat, keeping the character of tribal culture within its struggle...a strong deterrent ... (can be built up against) in such anti-national and anti-people activity.

Pithoragarh, a district near the Indo-Nepal border in Northern U.P., has been facing a problem of massive mining activity causing a major environmental hazard. Mining started here in 1971. The magnesite mining has affected 70-75 villages in the region. Indiscriminate mining in the area has disrupted life in entire villages. All this and more figured in the account of Dinesh Joshi of Uttarkhand Sangharsh Vahini. The simple hill folk never even knew as to what was happening when mining started. The private miners have acquired mining rights by malpractices. The mining activity has caused landslides and entire villages have been wiped out. Illegal leases have been obtained. The blastings have caused damage to grazing land and schools and roads have been damaged. The environment has been polluted. There is no drinking water in most of the villages. No compensation has been paid for the acquired lands. It is estimated that in the next 5 to 10 years more than 100 villages

will be wiped out. The people in the region suffer from T.B. The Vahini had organised some protest but their activists were assaulted. There is no hope of any form of opposition building up. "Under circumstances, we do not know what civil liberties mean, we do not know what development means. All that we know is that we are sick, we are dying". These were the poignant words with which Dinesh Joshi concluded.

Shankar Niyogi, the militant trade union leader from Chattisgarh Mines Sharmik Sangh, Dalli-Rajahara, Madhya Pradesh, gave a systematic analysis and showed what is wrong with mechanisation as a policy. He based himself on the struggle of his union which resisted the attempt of Bhilai Steel Plant to mechanise the Dalli mine. The analysis was based on detailed statistics of production and cost. The focus in his paper was on the inefficiency of mechanisation as an alternative and the politics in the policy of mechanisation. Quoting the example of western countries he made out that machines were a threat to the very fabric of their civilisation. This process of mechanisation is being followed blindly by India - a country with a vast surplus of labour. The cost in manual mines is much lower than that of mechanised mines. In return for all the massive investment, the mechanised mines operate at about 22 to 70% of their capacity. After mechanisation the production of coal has stagnated. The policy of the type of mining (whether open cast or underground, in the case of coal) has been governed by the type of surplus machines produced in the 'donor' countries. The machinery is dumped, irrespective of the need of the 'receiving' country, by means of special agreements. Coal India Limited has ordered shovels worth Rs.9.2 crores from USSR while HEC, Ranchi, has shut down the production of shovels because it was unable to sell them. Heavy Engineering Corpn., Ranchi produces shovels in collaboration with USSR. Even today India is almost like a colonial country. While we have excess stocks of iron ore we are producing only 8.6 mt of steel. Most of the iron ore is being exported (around 60%). In fact, we are importing steel (4 lakh tonnes of pig iron from America). India will also import coal from Poland at a price which exceeds the international price by 10 \$ per tonne. So also we are incurring losses on the export of iron ore. This is an indication of the nature of international pressures that operate in the mining sector. Its implications for mechanisation are obvious.

"In the Dalli semi-mechanised mine, the workers have been so successful in raising ore that the mechanised processing facility is unable to cope with even 30% of the production. The production power of the workers has forced the machines to accept defeat." Niyogi concludes by reiterating that "the way in which our mines are being

mechanised is an utterly irresponsible process...This harms both the people themselves as well as the production process. Hence, only by keeping the people's true interests constantly in mind and by carrying them along can any change in the processes of production be effected."

The subsequent debate was opened by three academicians who are working on mines. Later it was taken up by the workers and activists from the mining areas. Ms. Nandita Mongia, a researcher of coal mining, pointed out that the mechanisation certainly introduced a conflict of growth Vs. employment. Post-1974 data show decline in employment in coal mining. Empirically, cost per tonne in coal falls only upto a point. In the case of mechanisation depreciation and maintenance cost are higher, so actually the cost criterion is unreliable for comparison. But the important thing is that the stock of machines is much too disproportionate to the actual use of machines in terms of machine hours. The shift to open cast mining was due to technical reasons and not due to the nature of imported machinery. Also, the stagnancy in output is because of lack of demand for certain types of coal and not due to mechanisation. In spite of all this, given the technical constraints, it was possible to shift to semi-mechanised techniques, whose productivity is probably greater and indigenous machines are more suitable. In fact, in the western countries whenever a choice of technology is made the cost calculations include some element of weightage for social costs such as the environmental impact, etc. Therefore, while machines may mean more growth the social cost of such growth must be assessed before making such a choice of technology. Semi-mechanisation, in this sense, would certainly mean a lower social cost of growth.

Dr. Gopal Kadekodi, an economist from the Institute of Economic Growth, put forward certain points for discussion. He disagreed with Joshi's questioning the need for mining itself. Certain amount of leisure is required so some extent of mechanisation is necessary. Workers do not like such tough work. Demand for labour would naturally be more while developing the mine and later on it would taper off. The workers are not able to adjust to this change, therefore, there is social conflict. They should acquire the skills and get absorbed in the mine. Regarding dumping he felt that old technology was more relevant than 1980 technology so it does not necessarily harm the recipient country. Although in UK, Poland, etc., capital creation is irreversible in India it is not so. The change from underground to open cast is an example of capital irreversibility.

Paul Kurien, a researcher in iron ore mining also took part in the discussion. He said that the Dalli experiment was a pointer and that there should be pressure to make it possible to evolve such appropriate technology within the country. Prof. A.R. Desai, the well-known sociologist, pointed out that the struggles against mechanisation was

taking place not only in mining but in various other areas.
There is an urgent need to integrate or at least, inform
one struggle area with the other.

In reply to the debate initiated by the intellectuals the workers responded by their earthy perception of the problem. Janardhan, a worker from CMSS, Dalli-Rajahara, strongly denounced the contention that workers prefer leisure. He said that it was not a question of choice it was an economic compulsion. Regarding training themselves he stated that it was their keen desire to be skilled but in an unequal society opportunities do not come by choice. In a similar fashion other workers also gave spirited talks highlighting their conditions and also giving their perceptions about mechanisation. One of them branded machines as thieves-robbing all the good things of life.

The Secretary of PUDR, Summanta Banerji, hoped there would be more occasions when PUDR would bring people from different fields together. The meeting ended with a film entitled - "The Tin Mountain of Bolivia". ~~It was~~ about the biggest tin mine in the world. The mine is called 'Signoventi' meaning 20th century and has 500 miles of tunnels. The workers are living (or dying) in miserable conditions. The military regime adds to that oppression. Having the highest incidence of Tuberculosis-Silicosis, the mining town has an average life expectancy of around 30 years. The film ends on the note 'Signoventi (20th century) is dying.'