

# Teachers and Trade Unionism

Amrik Singh writes from New Delhi

**I**N any trade union situation, there has to be an employer and employees. More than that, however, there has to be an element of exploitation of the employee by the employer. When it comes to higher education, we have developed a peculiar kind of variation from this pattern. It is the State which is the employer and the teachers are its employees. When it comes to grievances, sometimes those are real and sometimes those are selfimagined or invented, if one may say so.

Currently, we have a strike called by the All India Association of University and College Teachers Organisation (AIFUCTO). In addition, we have another body called FED-CUTA. This is an organisation of the Federation of Central Universities Teachers which came into being in the wake of the 1987 strike. Most of the time it was dormant but, of late, it has become active. Currently it represents the teachers of the central Universities. These are directly funded by the UGC, it may be added. The AIFUCTO has called an indefinite strike while the latter body has given a call for a strike for a few days. Whether it chooses to end the strike beyond the first few days or extends it remains to be seen.

The issue is the UGC scales of pay. It should not be necessary to repeat the story of what the Rastogi Committee recommended, how the UGC revised those recommendations as it were and what decision has been finally taken by the Ministry of HRD. These have been discussed for quite some months now.

Having said this, it should be clearly recognised that these two bodies have two different targets. The AIFUCTO knows that in all likelihood the Centre is not likely to reconsider the decision made by it already. Its target, however, is the various State governments. While the Centre has committed itself to pay 80 per cent of the additional expenditure incurred by a State for a period of five years, it stands to reason that every

State has to take a definite decision in this regard.

The AIFUCTO believes that, if the strike goes on long enough, several of the State governments will accept the UGC scales; otherwise they might keep the matter pending. Even if half a dozen states do that, the strike would have been successful to that extent. Maybe, more than half a dozen will do it. One cannot say anything about how the situation will eventually turn out.

One thing is clear, however. The decisions will not be taken on merits. If that were to be the case, hardly any state government would accept the revised scales of pay. This is for two reasons. The first one is that most States do not have the requisite resources. This they know and nobody has to tell

not going to teach.

Properly speaking, the parents should be up in arms against what is happening. Almost two months of the academic session have already been wasted. But the fee charged is so nominal that nobody seems to be upset about it. What is more, examinations are conducted in such a shoddy and casual manner that even if a student studies for a month or two, he manages to clear the exam in a large number of cases. As to those who are going to fail, that is going to happen in any case; that seems to be the general cynical view.

In this background, therefore, a prolonged strike will simply wear down the state governments and, in the end, they will surrender. This is what has been happening all these years

how or other. Last time, when there was a strike in Delhi University, the UGC chose to be a little tough and wanted every college to attest as to which teachers had been taking classes or were on strike. Some of even those who were on strike somehow managed to be counted amongst those who had been teaching.

This did not happen in every case. In certain cases, Principals were a little assertive or there was some other evidence to the contrary. But wherever evidence could be fudged and the person at the top was not assertive, even those who were on strike managed to get their salary. It was, in other words, a signal case of eating the cake and having it too.

That is why the reference to the classical trade unionism was made in the beginning. Trade union workers when they go on strike are prepared to be victimised and sometimes are actually victimised. In certain cases, they go through a very difficult time. In middle class professions, and college and university teaching belong to this category, there are no such ground rules with the result that even those who are on strike can, unless it is publicly embarrassing, get away with being on strike and also get their full salary. This is a game in which all political parties — Congress, BJP, CPI, CPM etc. are all involved.

To say no more about it, trade unionism amongst teachers is a game in which the only victims are the students and their parents. For the rest, decision makers do not mind cutting corners, doling out public funds and not feel at all bothered whether any education is taking place or not. With this frame of mind, the only question one can legitimately ask is: When will we learn, indeed if at all?

— Mandira

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them about it. In terms of commitments, they are over-extended. Not only that, there are equally pressing demands both from the sectors of elementary education and school education.

It is the second factor, however, which is sought to be demolished by this indefinite strike. Hardly any State has the professional expertise to go into the question whether the problem in higher education is underpayment or underperformance. The truth of the matter is that while in most cases teachers are paid as well as other Class-I employees, by and large, the real problem is that they do not perform. The dominant feeling throughout the country is that no matter what the teachers are paid at the level of higher education, they are

and this is what might happen even this time.

In the case of the Central Universities, the target is somewhat different. Teachers are not fully convinced that the last word has been said on the subject. On all earlier occasions, despite assertions to the contrary, concessions have been made. The prevalent view therefore is that the greater the disruption, the greater the chances of even extravagant demands being conceded.

There also, two other factors at work. One is the role of the universities which deal with teachers. The other is the UGC which deals with the universities. Both of them are unsure about what Ministry of HRD will do. Vice-Chancellors who are mostly political appointees wish to survive in office some-