

Newspaper clipping

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Milestone in Delhi's Nepali Migrant Community on May Day 2005

by Democracy Alliance

We are workers too!

As workers all over the world celebrated their day, in Delhi too, 700 Nepali chowkidars (watchmen) and their families assembled for the first convention of the Migrant Nepalese Watchmen Labour Committee (MNWLC). The congress was organised by the MNWLC's First Convention Organising Committee, which itself was an elected body, with cooperation from the South Asia Study Centre (Delhi) and the National Centre of Competence in Research North-South.

It was a colourful and festive atmosphere as South Asians gave solidarity to the efforts of the Nepali migrants to organise themselves. Among the speakers were Ashim Roy of the New Trade Union Initiative, Rajeev Dimri, Secretary, All India Confederation of Central Trade Unions (AICCTU), Baba Adhav (Maharashtra Hamal Panchayat Mazdoor Union, of headload carriers), R. Geeta (Tamilnadu, Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam, union of construction workers), Subash Bhatnagar (National Campaign Committee of Unorganised Sector Workers), Dr Shekhar (Centre for Education and Communication), Hari Roka (political analyst), Dilaram Acharya (Member of the dissolved Parliament, Janmorcha Nepal), Deepak Bhatt (All India Nepalese Free Student Union), Siddhi Manandhar (National Centre of Competence in Research North-South) and Arun Joshi (South Asia Study Centre).

For observers and participants, it was a rare treat to watch the working class come into its own. It was all the more stirring because this is a migrant labour force. Narendra Bahadur, a watchman, sang a poignant song about his homeland and the difficulties there with the lack of opportunities that brought him from the beautiful land of Sagarmatha and Kanchenjunga to Delhi. The slogans of 'Long live worker unity' were punctuated with the spectacle of headload workers arriving from Maharashtra on bicycles to give solidarity to the Nepali migrant workers. The message was clear, no matter the language, sex, caste, nationality or colour of a worker, there has to be unity across all borders.

Who are the watchmen?

The watchmen are mostly from three districts (Bajura, Bajang and Achham) of the underdeveloped Far-Western region of Nepal and that too from the marginalised groups. There is no count of how

many Nepalis work as night watchmen in Delhi (or indeed of the numbers of Nepali migrants in Delhi). An estimate of the South Asia Study Centre is 10,000. Of these, 2,000 are organised in eight area committees.

The work of the chowkidars is invisible. They themselves are invisible, making themselves only heard through their whistles and their sticks (lathis). Representatives of the workforce came and shared their problems and issues with the mass. Dabal Bahadur Rawat of Bajura as the co-convenor of the organising committee narrated that chowkidars have to be responsible, on time, stationed in place and always alert.

They are vulnerable to the residents associations who deprive them of a month's salary if there is a single case of robbery or theft in the neighbourhood. The police make them do their job of policing but catch them if there is any untoward incident. Rawat demanded housing for chowkidars, compensation from the residents in case of injury and death during duty, and recognition of chowkidars as part of the Indian labour force.

Rawat spoke passionately about how generations have done this work in Delhi, and yet the next generation cannot escape and has to return to perform the same job. Chowkidars are not beggars seeking charity. They demand their right to be treated on par with Indian citizens for the simple reason that they protect Indian citizens and their property. The chowkidars do not possess any proof of identification as workers.

Bir Bahadur Rawal of Model Town said he laboured for fifteen years. He never thought that he would see the day when he would be on the dais speaking to an august gathering and that they would be moving toward the formation of a union. He recounted his difficult life and said that not having an organisation left him at the mercy of others.

'We made a constitution, now we are a samhiti, later we will make a union!' declared Narendra Bhandari. Highlighting the one-sidedness of responsibility in the unwritten contract that watchmen are forced to enter into, Raju Bhattarai, Coordinator, South Asia Study Centre, gave examples of how watchmen had been killed while on duty, and there was no compensation or no recognition of their contribution as martyrs in the labour process. If something happens to them, no one is responsible.

The larger context

The congress raised many issues that showed the connections between worker issues, cross-border bilateral problems, the position of the working class in the political economy of South Asia and the limitations of the rule of law as applied differentially. Hari Roka asked the mass why they were all here as migrants (prabashis) toiling in other's kitchens and restaurants and guarding deserted streets at night. It was because something was terribly wrong back home. And maybe through organising

themselves on the basis of their occupation, they could begin to dream of resolving issues that brought them here, to Delhi, in the first place.

It was evident that the many Nepali migrant worker organisations in India were doing a splendid job of organising and mobilising Nepalis. However, this was oriented towards more 'maximalist' political agendas and less focused on worker qua worker problems that also included minimum and fair wages, rights of compensation, health, education, housing, recreation, and other rights.

Second, there seems to be a gap in understanding the legal rights of Nepali migrant workers in the Indian labour law. South Asia Study Centre began its foray into organisation through two years of ground research on the living issues of Nepali migrant workers in Delhi. Further, there was little effort so far to engage Indian trade unions with Nepali migrant worker issues, i.e. with that component of the workforce that is not Indian. This connecting happened beautifully on 1 May 2005 for the first time. The process is well underway and can only move ahead.

A step ahead in organisation

The chowkidars devised a process for forming the secretariat. From each of the eight areas in Delhi, five elected representatives each came to an understanding on which of them would go to the central committee as a member. In one case, there were two names from one area committee. All the forty-one representatives from all the area constituencies voted and one of them was elected for the central committee.

There were therefore nine central committee members, of which one represented all of Delhi was nominated as a consensus candidate. The members of the secretariat (president, vice-president, general secretary, joint secretary and treasurer) among these nine were elected by the forty-one representatives.