

In JNU

May Day and Its Farce

Evening, 30th April 2015. Contract workers from the Civil and Electrical Engineering Department are told that they are not to sign in from the next day onwards, that their contracts have been terminated. A new company is coming. The electrical eng workers hear from the civil eng ones that any worker who wants to keep his job in JNU will have to pay Rs 5,000.

The next day (1st May), threatened by these potential lay-offs and yet compelled their own uncertainty, these contract workers gathered in front of the admin block. They got word from the administration that they should all print and sign their names on a blank sheet of paper.

1. This provoked a debate between the workers. Some came to sign the paper, others were opposing it. The paper was blank—even the company's name was not written on it—so all the workers saw that it could be a trick. Some were saying, "If we work today, then tomorrow (Saturday), and Sunday, and this time Monday is also a day off... the admin will want to make us work on these three days and we still won't even have any job security here. Who knows how they'll work out our wages. And they could throw us all out in three days. Just then some workers started talking about doing a roadblock and clearing this whole issue up. One very outspoken worker spoke up angrily on this point. "First they snatch away our wages, then they try and provoke us even further. We won't have any impact on them unless we make a road block... And if we watch on quietly as they kick us in the stomach, they'll only want to take more from us."

2. Seeing the situation heating up outside, the admin sent a junior engineer from the electrical eng department to speak to the workers. He took the electrical eng contract workers aside and reassured them no-one would be fired this month; they will get the fully drawn-up register today itself. The workers interrupted him, "One month? What's *one month*? After that it will be the same trick again. You're not a contractor, you're not admin. There's no point talking to you." At the back some workers were saying how he was speaking the admin's language for them. "We're going to get together and block the road. The decision has to be taken today." Sensing the workers' anger, the junior engineer says, "Look, do what you have to do. I was just telling you what I was told up there. The rest is up to you."

3. At that point the workers started discussing the idea of a roadblock more intensely. Some civil eng workers came up and started saying, "They're dividing us by talking to us separately." Another outspoken worker from among them said this had happened before, to the gardeners. The admin had scared them and put them to work. "Now they want to break us too. The main issue is contractualisation. As long as that stays, this will keep happening to everyone every two or three months. This can't go on!" This second outspoken worker has been working in JNU for twenty years and knows a lot of workers here. He kept calling on the other workers not to fall into any kind of trap set by the admin. He said, these people won't listen, let's go directly and make the roadblock, and others will get to know about it too." The other outspoken worker from before also gave his support to this idea.

4. Just then the workers got called over to speak with the staff association. Ajay, the general secretary of the staff association and a caretaker at Mahi-Mandvi Hostel, asked the workers, "Whoever is the leader, come inside and talk to us." The workers said, "There is no leader here. If you want to talk, we'll all talk." Everyone went in and sat in the staff association office. Ajay asked the 'leaders' to come to the front. The workers again said there were no leaders among them. Ajay said, "First, one of you say what you've got to say, then we'll speak."

That first outspoken worker summarised the whole story: the register, the request for signatures on a blank page, the Rs 5000 rejoining fee to be paid to the new company, just to keep working in JNU. Then the staff assoc bureaucrat said, "First tell us this, did you use to sign on JNU's own register or on a company's?" All the workers answered, "On JNU's." Then he said, "Whoever signed the sheet this morning, get to work, the proper register will be made up by evening. I can't do anything about the 5000 rupees issue, that has come from higher

up. Now go, the rest of the contract workers have gone to start work.

One student-worker who was sitting there asked, “Okay tell us one thing, it’s a JNU register, it’s a JNU job, JNU pays the wages, the workers have been working in JNU itself for ten-twelve years, and this will be the same after today: yes or no?”

The bureaucrat confirmed this, “Yes of course.”

The student-worker continued, “Look, their wages come from JNU itself, the workers even have their bank accounts in JNU.”

The bureaucrat confirmed this too, “Yes, of course.”

“Then what’s this company doing in the middle of all this?” asked the student-worker. “When the administration could pay everyone directly, what’s this contractor doing here?”

The workers started saying, “Yeah, pay us directly. Okay, take ten percent maybe but get rid of the contractor.” Another student-worker said, “Why should they take even one percent?” Then the first outspoken worker called for quiet and said, “One thing is completely clear: the worst disease—well, maybe cancer is even more dangerous but—this practice of contractualisation. With cancer, we might die one day, but with contractualisation, we die every day! We don’t want this contractualisation.”

This left the bureaucrat speechless. Finally, blustering with anger, he raised his voice, “Yes, okay, whatever, but there’s no place, no university in the world where companies are not involved. There are companies for everything. Look at IIT. Look at DU and Jamia. Companies are getting contracts everywhere.”

At that point, a student interrupted him. “Companies are coming in, that’s why there are struggles and strikes going on there too. It happened in Rohtak, it happened in DU. As for JNU, it keeps happening here. You don’t have this information but we know all about it. Just last month in Wazirpur this was happening with workers in a Honda unit after the contract was given to a new company. They went on strike against contractualisation there too.” The workers began talking among themselves, then some of them raised their voices saying, “We don’t want contractualisation. We want relief from our everyday worries.”

Seeing their anger, the bureaucrat started to say, “Look, there is no need to worry, the proper register will be delivered by evening, just get to work.” The workers hearing this said, “Oh he’s just speaking the admin’s language.” And saying this, more than half of the workers got up and made for the door.

Just then a young leader from AICCTU arrived on the campus. The workers had been calling his phone all morning. He arrived and spoke as if giving his own voice to the workers’ anger: “Today, May Day, the administration has indicated that our own ongoing court case regarding the staff register is in danger of being in a very weak position.” The workers immediately began talking of making a roadblock. The young leader said, “Okay, make a roadblock but first we’ll have to gather more workers. Just take a moment to think about it. We won’t get anywhere in a hurry. First gather four-five-hundred workers, then we’ll make the roadblock.”

At that point some workers rushed off in the direction of the admin block—they could see Raavat coming out of the building. Raavat is the chief engineer in the JNU engineering department. According to these workers, the new company who has just got this contract belongs to Raavat’s brother-in-law, and for the past 15 days he had been threatening to lay them off. In fact, he had already laid off several workers before that. He had employed some 200 workers somewhere near Connaught Place, and had so far only given them 15 days’ salary. This might also be the reason they were asking the JNU workers for the Rs 5000.

5. Raavat walked up to them and starting saying, “Everyone else please leave, I’ll speak to my own workers.” One worker, red with anger, interrupted Raavat, squaring up to him and raising his voice, “What do you mean *my workers* huh? Are we your slaves?!” The young leader also rushed up and started telling him off. “What kind of talk is that? What do you mean by ‘my workers’? Stop pointing your finger at the workers.” Quite a few workers rushed up to him. Raavat, seeing that, turned right round and made for the admin block.

With this whole commotion going on, these workers had become even more angry. They started leaving to go and make the roadblock right away. Meanwhile, the young leader turned to the outspoken worker and, almost telling him off, said, “It’s not going to work just like that. Whoever else can join, give them a call, and some others can take a bike and round up some more workers around the campus. Nothing’s going to happen unless we get at least 400 workers with us.”

6. On this point, some workers said, “We’ve got sixty-seventy workers here. Let’s all get together and march round the campus, and try and get the rest of the workers to join us while we’re at it. What’s the point in just a few of us going?” A student standing nearby told the young leader that, “Just like the student union does its mess campaigns, we will also do a mess campaign with them.” But the young leader said there would be problems with everyone going. “Around 150 housekeeping workers will be coming to sign the register at 3 o’clock. We’ll need a lot of people to keep them here and block their way.” One student suddenly interrupted him and said, “What do you mean, ‘block their way?’” “Arre, you don’t understand. These people tend to slip through your fingers. You have to catch them and keep them here.”

After this debate, the workers found themselves in a dilemma. Divided up, they started talking in smaller groups. They also got to know that the administration had meanwhile been quite successful in frightening—or inciting—the workers.

7. Seeing the others dispersing like that, some workers said, “Why don’t we all just do the campaign?” There was general agreement about this. The young trade union leader stayed behind to stop the housekeeping workers. Around 40 workers left to do the campaign.

8. On the campaign, the workers raised slogans: “Stop contractualisation! Stop dividing workers! Long live the student-worker struggle! Down with the JNU administration!” For several workers it was the first time they were going to the mess or the hostel, not to work, but to *talk about work*. There was a sense of uncertainty about this, and at the same time the mixing of different segments of the working class—the mess workers, the guards standing at the gates, the students eating in the mess—was creating an uneasy atmosphere.

This was defamiliarising the usual union campaign and its routine form. The workers were generally speaking in the language of “We’ve been laid off and we’re asking you for help in ending contractualisation.” Everywhere people were asking for the Rs 5000. One worker who had spoken to people in several hostels was saying loudly and clearly, “First we earn so little money, then it all goes on food and rent. How can we afford to pay so much? That’s why you should come join us today and help us with our struggle.” One student-worker was saying again and again they had not come to ask for help. “If you are eating in the mess today, and there’s electricity, fan, and food, that means people must be working. Just like us, you have to eat in order to do your work, and you can only keep on working by keeping that process going. That way, their contractualisation is not just their problem, it’s ours too. These comrades, in their own struggle, are showing the way. If we can join them we might be able to understand how our own struggles against contractualisation might be. You can see what’s going on today—no permanent jobs anywhere. Look at the AdHoc problem in DU. You know all about the API situation and all that. We know from our own experience about the pressure on academic work. That’s why we’ve come with these people, actually for our own struggle.”

9. The workers made their way back to the staff association office. On their way back, they kept on talking with the gardeners, housekeeping workers, guards, and so on. Meanwhile at the staff assoc office, even more workers had amassed. The numbers were slowly growing. Along with the student union bureaucrats, people had also come from various leftist student organisations. By 3, 3:30, around 400 workers had gathered there. The roadblock idea was being discussed intensely by the workers. The level of excitement was on the rise. Many were saying, “This is it—a showdown—we’ll stop only when contractualisation stops—this daily death has run its course!” Some workers were speaking to the rest, calling loudly for the roadblock to be made.

Soon enough, some put themselves at the front of the group. The rest of them were already of the same mind and attitude. The second outspoken worker was the furthest forward in the roadblock, and with him was also the first outspoken worker. From behind came the voices of the student union comrades, several student groups and with them some of the workers. They were saying that some of the trade union comrades had gone to speak to the administration, and that they should wait for them to come back.

10. The workers have been pushing forward. They stop suddenly, and just then the trade union comrades make their way back. They speak to the first outspoken worker for a little while. The first outspoken worker calls the other workers round, and standing up on a rock with the trade union leader, begins to make a speech to the whole group. The trade union leader also speaks, first reading out the list of laid-off workers and asking each to raise his hand when his name is called out. As he reads the names out, he asks such-and-such to raise his hand, then so-and-so to raise his... Some workers are present, others aren’t.

After reading the names he turns to all the workers and begins to speak: “We’ve spoken to the administration. Not one worker is losing his job this month. By evening their proper register will have been made up. But that company can do whatever it wants, whenever it wants. Contractors answer to no-one, and the same goes for the administration. But whatever has to be done... our chosen comrades are here, along with the workers’ union, there are housekeeping workers, mess workers... so we can sit together and prepare and discuss what is to be done. Three or four people here may come to raise their voices to incite and provoke you. Two days later they will not answer your phone calls. A lot of people here tend to say their bit and then just disappear. But who will stay with you the whole year round? You know the answer, we don’t need a certificate to prove it. For now, let’s make sure to get to Chandrabhaga Hostel for five o’clock. There’s a procession starting from there. We need to gather in as great a number as possible.” The first outspoken worker—who is from the workers’ union—is then handed the microphone and says, “We put our trust in the union. No-one’s losing their job. Now let’s go get involved in the procession.”

11. Slowly the workers start to leave. Just then the second outspoken worker says to the union leader, “Look, we were all gathered and ready to defeat this contractualisation. What happened to that?” The leader replies, “Contractualisation will hardly be ended in one day.” The worker says, “It was only for that that we were planning the roadblock.” The leader: “If you want to do something yourself, go do it. We are not forbidding you. But no-one from the union will support you.” On this point the worker talks back angrily, “I’ve been working in JNU for 16 years. Who’s going to take a register of those 16 years?” At five o’clock, the procession leaves. All the leftist student orgs and trade unions participate. At the end, there are speeches.

In our present moment of capitalist development, there is a certain tendency we can see everywhere. In each case, either contract companies are being suddenly changed round, or the companies themselves start breaking up into small parts. This makes the workers a lot more precarious than they were before. Capital must always be working to increase the productivity of capitalist social relations, and yet when it does this by relentlessly making workers more and more precarious, this precarity actually deepens the crisis of the capitalist law of value. In this situation, capital tries to shape the social division of labour so that it keeps control of that precarity. The tendency of contractualisation emerges as capital’s effort to maintain this control.

In this neoliberal stage of capitalism, the crisis of capital has become a permanent crisis. The question is not how to convert precarity into stability, but rather how to liberate precarity from the law of value. Look at it this way, from the perspective of working class liberation—this way we can try and understand the self-activity of those contract workers on May Day. We can also identify what are the decisive tendencies, on campus specifically, and in working class politics generally.

We have seen several examples where, even in that very precarious moment of going from one contract company to another, workers show the potential for effective struggle. But that potential is not currently able to become a process of developing class solidarity. For example, when contract workers have been laid off by one company and haven’t yet been reinstated by the new one, it is in that uncertain moment that this May Day struggle has emerged. Similarly, just a few weeks ago, contract workers at a Honda Unit in Wazirpur began to struggle when the company was being changed. In such uncertain moments, the uselessness of contractualisation and capitalist social relations become clear to the working class.

That process of ‘becoming clear’ is also where the grounds for class solidarity are prepared. We can understand class solidarity as the unending development of the struggles within different segments of the working class, and of the struggles between the segments, and of the unending development of unity in these struggles. Generally, influential ‘leftist’ politics, instead of developing this process, works to preserve the working class in its existing segments and forge a ‘unity of struggles’ between them. This model of ‘unity of struggles’ reduces the potential of class solidarity to the level of individual experiential and sociological accounts—and all in the name of working class liberation. This kind of politics not only reproduces working class segmentation, it also produces the capitalist law of value and capitalist social relations.

But what is the rightful place of this influential leftist tendency, which develops on the lines of ‘unity of struggles’? Nothing more than the experiential world of the workers and its sociological manifestations. Here, a fictitious unity is attempted on the basis of the different experiences of those different segments of the working class. The question of subsistence and poverty keep appearing in these struggles. In the mess campaign, workers faced with an impending crisis of survival were talking about the help they needed. Capital, by intimidating the workers with the impending threat of hunger, poverty and death, on the one hand facilitates social division, in this case contractualisation (that is, a controlled and regimented production process). On the other hand, this

politics of 'unity of struggles', developed on the basis of this experience, facilitates the reproduction of those same situations of hunger, poverty and death. And so this politics, which ignores the dialectical development of precarity and uncertainty, first of all limits the notion of 'primitive accumulation' to a historical era, and thus gets bogged down in the stage of bourgeois democratic revolution. It then gets mixed up in the subaltern politics which oppose primitive accumulation.

Instead of understanding the material bases of working class desire, located within the desires of workers, this tendency fails to see the distinction. For example, when the second outspoken workers is given assurances, not of a concerted movement against contractualisation, but of job stability for the rest of the month, and a proper register expected by evening, he replies angrily: "I've been in JNU for 16 years. Who will register that?" We can either see that in accordance with the desire for permanence—as reflected in the trade unions' demands—or we can see it as a recognition of the uselessness of the capitalist law of value. In reality, capital cannot give an account of those 16 years. And when that worker is in a struggle to end contractualisation, in that moment he is expressing the working class desire to end the whole irrational system of capitalism.

This model of 'unity of experiences' looks at the different segments of the working class, and their different levels of precarity, and the different places they inhabit—as mess workers, housekeeping workers, gardeners, students, teachers, etc.—and sees the value of their struggles in an exchange relation with one another. It forgets that exchange-value is nothing more than value's mode of appearance, as Marx said. This language of exchange is actually manifested in help, support and frustration. And here we see how this leftist model of politics works in the context of struggle: it turns up, rallies for support, celebrates, and that's it. Like leaving the campus to see a struggle in Okhla, Gurgaon, or Wazirpur, and writing an article in support, or participating in a protest at Jantar Mantar. In the struggle of the contract workers in the Civil and Electrical Engineering Departments, that support-giving politics drags nascent class solidarity back into the law of value. The same thing can be seen in the mess campaign.

On one hand, JNU workers are taking up a process of breaking their segmentations. On the other hand, by understanding that break only in the language of exchange, they immediately adopt the language of help and support. That language, fixed to its experiential basis, not only puts limits on the developing process of class solidarity, but actually develops that limit into a model of politics which takes 'unity of struggles' as its basis. That model, in turn, continues to re-establish the capitalist law of value. The student-worker participating in the mess campaign intervenes in that language of help and support, saying "Don't come in order to give help. These workers, in their own struggle, are showing us a direction which, by learning from it, we all in our different positions could sharpen our struggle against the law of value." And yet, even this speech remains limited to the 'unity of struggles' form, which everywhere develops on the experience-centered model. In this neoliberal period where even unemployment is a type of work, our inquiry into capitalist relations remains incomplete. This incompleteness of inquiry finally makes us into yet another part of capital's ideological framework.

This ideological framework has, with great clarity, revealed itself to us in Raavat's language, in the language of the junior engineer, and the staff assoc bureaucrat, and the trade union leader. In the end, they are all trying to negotiate with the workers by assuring them of a proper register to be made up by evening. Of all these contractors, the first three are silenced by the workers themselves. But what stands out is the language of the trade union, which not only claims to guarantee them a proper register and a month's job security, but also says, "We will be your brothers, or fathers, the whole year round, we ourselves will settle the question of what is to be done," all the while threatening the workers with abandonment should their attempts at self-organization and self-activity be taken any further. In this process, capital's ideological framework is strengthened. It is precisely this which ensures, year after year, that working class anger gets its pointless annual gathering, and nothing more.

To adapt a useful phrase from Marx, the suppression of working class anger is JNU's May Day tragedy. The evening procession is JNU's May Day farce.

To be continued...

Zero History