

Flowers Blooming in Fire Ajmer Brick Kiln Workers Struggle 2014



Ajmer is a medium size historical city (population around six lakhs) located in the centre of Rajasthan. Like most cities in India, Ajmer too has a number of brick kilns located around it. As is the case with brick kiln workers everywhere, workers are recruited against advance and work in bondage like conditions where violence and abuse are common. Rajasthan Pradesh Int Bhatta Majdur Union rescued bonded laborers from a brick kiln in the year 2012-13 after receiving a complaint. Next year 2013-14, it organized the workers into a Union and launched a struggle for higher wages and improved work conditions. After going for strike for two days, the workers won a historic victory when the owners were forced to sign a collective wage agreement granting wage hikes ranging from 20 to 30 percent.

The Union again approached the employers for a collective wage agreement for the 2014-15 season. However the employers adopted a tough stance and refused to hike wages at all. They said that they had already granted a high wage hike last year. This forced the Union to undertake a campaign that led to work stoppage for three days from December 10 to 12. The employers were forced to sign a collective wage agreement at the end.

Given below is an account of the struggle as captured through a daily diary

10th December

The brick kiln workers of kilns around Ajmer held a meeting today. Around 150 workers from 10 kilns attended the meeting. It was planned to take out a rally in town to the District Collector office. This plan was dropped after the employers established contact and promised to negotiate. However they did not come forward for negotiations till late in the evening. The workers then decided to stop work from tomorrow. The workers have demanded a 30% wage hike across various categories of work. The total strength of workers is expected to be around 3000 in 15 brick kilns in the area.



A local politician who is also a brick kiln owner has been elected president of the association. He is issuing veiled threats to the Union Secretary. Negotiations are planned for tomorrow but the situation remains fluid.

11th December. The workers had called for a strike today. This was successful and work stopped on nearly all the brick kilns where the call was given. The workers collected at Ashok Park near Ajmer. At one brick kiln, there was a violent incident. The owners' sons beat up a female *nikashi* worker who refused to work. This agitated the gathering. The workers recalled many similar incidents of the past where the workers were beaten up and abused. They wanted to take drastic action. A Union team went to the police station and forced the police to go to the brick kiln and rescue the couple who was beaten up. A report was filed at the police station.

In the afternoon, a delegation of workers went to meet the owners who had called for negotiations. However the owners adopted a very rigid stance and refused to hike the wages. They want the workers to continue working at the last year's rates. This is clearly not acceptable to the workers. The workers decided to continue the strike. They will collect again tomorrow to decide their future course of action. It is planned to take out a rally and give a memorandum to the district collector.

It is clear that the owners are adopting a hard line stance to finish off the Union. They are also giving indirect threats to Union activists.

12th December. While on 11th, the struggle seemed poised to continue for long, the very next day, the owners reached a settlement. While the wage hike granted was minimal – it ranged from 5% to 20% across different category of workers - the very fact that the owners were forced to sign a collective wage agreement during the agitation is victory for the Union.

So what brought about this turn in fortune! The union had decided to continue the strike with renewed vigor yesterday night after the failure of the first round of negotiations. A large contingent of the Union members then went to the local police station where the case had been filed for the violence perpetrated on a worker by the kiln owner. This forced the police to immediately file a FIR against the sons of the employer. The employers were also present there as they had come to get the accused released and file a cross FIR. The filing of FIR by a worker for being beaten up by the employer, a routine incident, is a historical first.

The workers collected in much larger numbers at the meeting ground in the morning. Strike continued at all the kilns. The employers had all contacted their labor contractors to come for a round of negotiation. The Union decided to keep itself away from negotiations. This was a deliberate tactics as the very presence of Union activists enraged the owners who blamed it for the reversal in the power dynamics. This is again a tactics that Union has adopted in previous struggles in Gujarat also where it does not sign a direct agreement but lets the contractors take the lead in getting a written agreement, sometimes even on individual kiln basis. The team of the labor contractors went for negotiations while the Union prepared for the workers' rally to the Collector office. Then the contractors requested that the rally be put off for couple of hours. The workers waited for two hours and then started the rally. The rally route passed through the place where negotiations were being carried out. The contractors and the owners came out and said that they have reached a settlement and it was being written. The rally then turned back to the meeting ground where the terms of the settlement were read out to the workers. There was naturally enough disappointment amongst the pathera workers who were given a very modest increase. However the Union persuaded everybody to accept the settlement as its own analysis of achieving a higher settlement was not hopeful.

The owners gave two reasons for not being able to grant a higher wage settlement. First they said that they had granted a high wage increase – 20 to 30% - last year. Secondly they said that the agitation was confined to some 15 kilns in one side of Ajmer. It did not cover the whole market. It left out some kilns that continued to supply the market where lower wages are prevalent. They also cited cheap supply from another state for depressing brick rates in the market. There was some truth in both these assertions. The Union assessed that the ability of the single kiln owners to accommodate a large wage hike was limited.

The positive from the agitation, besides the collective wage agreement, is the conscientization of the large mass of workers who participated in the agitation and led it. The workers mostly belong to the 'baori' caste, a Scheduled Caste that has a history of militancy. It is a denotified criminal tribe that now survives primarily on wage labor. The agitation led to identification of the Union by the workers as their own. This is potentially a very positive development. If the Union is able to build on it, it can create a very powerful workers movement that would have ramifications beyond just brick kiln work. Another positive aspect was Union's handling of the

labor contractors. There exist natural contradictions between the interest of the workers and the labor contractors. The collective agreement reached by the contractors would have not been accepted by the workers unless Union backed it. Role of labor contractors in movement of informal workers is critical. From its vast past experience, the Union has been able to fine tune a strategy of keeping both these sections together while advancing workers' movement.

The title of this piece is from a couplet by the famous revolutionary Urdu poet Faiz that is worth being quoted in full.

So have the people fought the oppression down the ages
Neither their custom is new, nor our struggle
So have we bloomed flowers in the fire
Neither their defeat is new, nor our victory

Team of Rajasthan Int Bhatta Majdoor Union who must be named at this juncture
Madan, Shaitan, Ratan, Shantilal, Khemraj, Prakash, Ramchandra, Ramesh, Meena, Atul,
Goodwin, Balwant, Sudhir, Baldev, Surajmal, Lal Bahadur,

