

Nimad Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan
Village Nandra, Tehsil Maheshwar,
District Khargone, Madhya Pradesh
Telefax : 07283-233162
E-mail : nobigdam@sancharnet.in

Press Release, 27.02.2003

Fifteen thousand farmers gather in Mandleshwar to protest against electricity tariff hikes in Madhya Pradesh

Collective declaration of civil disobedience, electricity bills stopped in over 500 villages in five districts of Madhya Pradesh : Jan Ayog formed under the chairmanship of Ex- CEA Chairman Shri Sambhamurty to assess power sector reforms in Madhya Pradesh

Nearly fifteen thousand farmers and workers belonging to 5 districts of Nimad region of Madhya Pradesh including Khargone, Dhar, Badwani, Dewas and Khandwa took part today in a massive public protest in Mandleshwar under the aegis of the Nimad – Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan to raise their voices against the recent, huge and completely unjustified increase in electricity tariff hikes in the state at the instance of the Asia Development Bank. These farmers and mazdoors have responded to the tariff increase that will take away water from the fields and light from the homes of millions of people by launching a programme of civil disobedience with the central slogan of " Videshi gulami nahi sahenge, Bill nahi Jail bharenge" (we will not withstand foreign domination, we will fill not the electricity bills, but the jails) that had spread to over 500 villages in the state by now.

The public program was addressed by local farmer leaders – Manshram Jat of District Dhar, Kalubhai of Village Mardana, Dr. Dongre of Kasrawad, Mahesh Billorey of Karahi, Lokendra Dhangar of Anjad region, and women activists Matamai, Punijiji and Sundar bai, as well as Magsayasay winner and peace activist Shri Sandeep Panday, national farmer's leader Shri Vijay Jawandia, Ms. Shalmali Guttal of FOCUS, Shamim Meghani of Shramik Adivasi Sangathan, Vijaybhai of Adivasi Mukti Sangathan and Shri Alok Agarwal, senior activist of the NBA as well as a founder of the Nimad Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan. The program was interspersed with songs of struggle, patriotism and celebrating the Narmada, and was conducted by Shri Sanjay Nigam. The farmers and leaders of the struggle called upon the state and Central governments to immediately cancel the agreement that they have signed with the Asian Development Bank and to take back the hike in electricity tariffs and warned the government that the people of this state would not withstand the subordination of public interest to foreign capital and their institutions including multilateral institutions such as the Asian Development Bank. They declared that if the governments do not respond positively to the demands of the people, and do not immediately cancel the agreement with the ADB and reverse the tariff hike, they would fill the jails of Madhya Pradesh in thousands.

Addressing the public meeting, Jagdish Patidar, senior activist of the Nimad Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan said that the privatization of public infrastructure would badly affect the farmers and must be therefore fought against at any cost. However, it must be

recognized that it was a part of a larger process of the state withdrawal from crucial public support for the agricultural sector, at the instance of the foreign institutions. Today, on the 27th of February, on the anniversary of the Godhra incident that had sparked off the most tragic and divisive period of Indian history since partition and independence, he said that it was unfortunate that the main stream political parties were refusing to respond the severe crisis facing the Indian farmers and workers and the Indian state , and were instead playing at divisive politics, Therefore the Nimad Malwa Kisan Maazdoor Sangathan had taken on the challenge to develop a Kisan and Mazdoor agenda in the next few months, through wide spread consultations that would put together issues that are crucial to the survival of farmers and workers.

Shri Alok Agarwal, the leader of the struggle against the destructive Maheshwar dam and one of the founder members of the Nimad Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan said that in the coming days, it would be imperative to extend the resistance to thousands of other villages all over the state. He warned the assembled farmers and workers that it is becoming increasingly clear that the state and Central governments were trying to sabotage and dismantle the state electricity board as a public sector entity. The daily newspaper reports about the failure of the thermal plants and the proposed retrenchment of 24,000 workers out of a total of 63,000 workers points in this direction. However, the experience of the power sector in private hands had failed even in the most developed state of the most developed country in the world – that of California where the massive tariff increases by the private operators and the resulting opposition forced the Governor to say that electricity is a public utility, not a luxury good and so it cannot be allowed to be in private hands. Therefore the survival of the farmers and the rural poor was dependent on the survival of the State Electricity Board and we must fight to save it and the entire production economy of Madhya Pradesh.

He said that although the ADB loan was for reforms, there was no improvement and the only outcome seems to be the ongoing dismantling of the MPSEB and to raise the electricity tariffs sufficiently high so as to attract private industrialists and multinational corporations. He said that the power sector reforms and the repeated tariff increases in Madhya Pradesh needed to be subjected to the most intense public scrutiny and the Nimad Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan was privileged to announce today the formation of such a Jan Ayog (People's commission) to be headed by the Ex- Chairman of the Central Electricity Authority - Shri Sambhamurty. Shri Probir Purakayashta, well known energy expert would also be part of this commission.

Women leaders of this area – Matamai of Village Pathrad, Sundarbai of Village Mardana and Punijiji of Village Sulgaon also addressed the gathering and especially the thousands of women gathered there. They said that now women would have to rise for the defence of their families, their villages and the country and that they must be prepared to face even the gallows or death to stop this destruction and foreign slavery. They announced that the next phase of the struggle against the tariff hike would be under the leadership of the organization – the Narmada Shakti Dal and that they would organize Gram Suraksha Samitis (Village Protection committees) and Grid Suraksha Samitis (Grid Protection Committees) to prevent the state from severing their electricity connections and plunging them into darkness.

Addressing the rally, Shri Vijay Jawandia, prominent farmer leader from Maharashtra shared the experience of the farmer's organizations from Maharashtra and the rest of the country and said that the WTO regime was crushing the farmers and pushing them to starvation and suicide, therefore the only alternative was to unite and fight whether it was for state support for procurement of cotton such as the farmers of Maharashtra had done, or against the privatization of public infrastructure. Shri Sandeep Pandey, peace activist and Magsaysay award winner called on the people to understand the link between globalisation and militarism. He said that it was important to understand that the wars against Afghanistan, Iraq or North Korea was not against global terrorism but to consolidate the economic interests of the developed countries and corporate rule throughout the world. Ms. Shalmali Guttal of FOCUS said that there was no alternative but to fight because it was not only in the power sector that the ADB was bringing in anti-people policies. Privatization of water, one of the most important of human needs is also very much a part of their agenda, therefore we need to prevent the takeover of our country by such institutions. She described the struggle against Samut Prakan Project in Thailand where the people eventually won against the ADB. She said that an alliance was emerging all through the world against the Asia Development Bank and other foreign financial institutions and so we must link up with these other struggles to be able to make an impact.

It may be noted that on the 30th of November 2002, the Madhya Pradesh State Electricity Regulatory Commission responded to the MPSEB's petition (made in compliance with Asia Development Bank's conditions for the release of its second tranche) for a 600% increase in tariffs by awarding an 800% increase !! Anticipating the tariff hike, the Nimad Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sanghathan and the Jan Sangharsh Morcha that is the forum of people's organizations in the state, offered resistance to this move and through October and November 2002, organized an Azadi Bachao – Bijli Bachao yatra and large public demonstrations and protests all through the state. This public pressure forced the state to subsidise the tariff increase, but even after subsidies, the increase works out to 300 %, i.e. a 67% increase in the bills to be paid and a decrease in the amount of electricity for which these tariffs are applicable from 24 hours to 6 hours.

However the peasants and mazdoors of Madhya Pradesh are not in a position to withstand these tariff increases, especially given the over all situation of the WTO regime, the fall in prices of agricultural commodities and increase in the price of agricultural inputs, fall in rural employment and continuing drought for the last five years. The first tariff increase in November 2001, also part of ADB's conditionalities has already put thousands of farmers outside the grid.

Sanjay Nigam

Mangat Verma

Chittaroopa Palit