

All set for a campaign on workers' security

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J AIPUR: Ravinder Shukla of Centre for Indian Trade Union's Rajasthan chapter said it was not as if the ordinary worker toiling away in factories or farms could ever expect those in power to hand over what he or she deserves. Struggle and vigilance are necessary to protect freedoms and gain what is one's rightful due and that is what trade unions of the country, which have been in existence even before Indian independence, have been fighting for. "Leaders of the freedom struggle - Lala Lajpat Rai, Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru were all at first leaders of workers. Now, however, the government wants to change the rules and disallow 'outsiders' from being part of trade unions," he said. Shukla was speaking on the first of the two-day meeting here to deliberate over a campaign for the provision of social security to workers, especially those in the unorganized sector.

Of India's 46.5 crore workers, according to the National Sample Survey Organization report of 2009-10, 43.7 crore were in the unorganized sector, a whopping 93%. This is the sector responsible for 50% of the country's Gross Domestic Product; yet, it functions with little job or social security.

Even within workplaces that are prestigious and coveted, though, contractual appointments are shrinking the privileges of workers, said Ashok Khandelwal, Supreme Court commissioner for the state of Rajasthan. He explained that in government-run universities and large private firms like Reliance, there is increased contractual labour.

The laws governing such contracts were, for a reason, called 'Contract Labour Regulation and Abolition Act, 1970', Khandelwal said. "The aim was ultimately to abolish such arrangements. The number of areas in which such appointments were possible was restricted earlier, but it is now permissible in a broad range of industries."

Khandelwal said that the fight to protect the interests of workers needs both legal acumen and political astuteness. "In case of the Employees Provident Fund Organization, the Centre makes a contribution too. In case of such savings by workers in the

states, why are there no contributions from the state governments?" Khandelwal asked, explaining that India's spend on social security is among the lowest in the world, at 0.05% of GDP.

Khandelwal also called upon the gathering to consider what is meant by social security. In the kind of social arrangements we now have, money is a necessity, he said, adding that employment and fair wages should be taken as bare necessities. The unemployed should get compensation. Such a provision exists under the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) - those who apply for a job under it, if not given work in a fortnight, receive half the wages as compensation. As defined by the International Labour Organization, social security is both universal and a legal right. There were also discussions around the Bhamashah health insurance scheme, pensions for the poor and disabled and the National Food Security Act.

Rajat Mishra, secretary and commissioner of the state department of labour and employment was also present for some part of the meeting on Thursday. The deliberations on Friday at the Institute of Development Studies will be aimed at planning a campaign for ensuring social security to workers in the unorganized sector.