



# THE CONDITION OF THE INDIAN WORKING CLASS



Dossier n° 64  
Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research  
May 2023

The artwork in this dossier is by [Birender Kumar Yadav](#), a multi-disciplinary Indian artist from Dhanbad, a city of iron ore and coal built on the backs of mineworkers and indigenous people. Much of Yadav's work, informed by his early experiences as the son of a blacksmith who worked in a coal mine, draws attention to the issues of class hierarchies and the plight of the working class.

**COVER**

Birender Kumar Yadav, *Walking on the Roof of Hell*, 2016. Khadau (wooden sandals).

# **THE CONDITION OF THE INDIAN WORKING CLASS**



Dossier n° 64 | Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research  
May 2023



Birender Kumar Yadav, *Erased Faces*, 2015. Brickmakers' thumbprints stamped onto their portraits on archival prints.

Two facts shattered the appearance of calm in contemporary India. First, COVID-19 exposed the decades-long evisceration of India's health system and the utter incompetence of a central government that was keener to ask the public to bang pots than to offer scientifically based, calm leadership. Second, Indian farmers and peasants held a year-long protest during the pandemic against three bills put forward by the central government that threatened the existence of farming in India. Their protest, which received support from the working class and from large sections of the middle class, was able to prevail against a government that does not have the habit of retreat.

Theories that emanate from the government and from think tanks that have grown to eclipse the democratic role of public universities could not explain either the impact of the virus or the political resilience of the farmers and peasants. The façade of their fine theories cracked open to display a history of naked avarice. Phrases such as 'labour market liberalisation' and 'trade liberalisation' did not produce an efficient, modern society. Instead, decades of cuts to the public health system, the use of underpaid 'volunteers' to provide care during the pandemic, and the promotion of unscientific ideas by elected officials resulted in a massive COVID-19 death toll. Meanwhile, these phrases – out of the textbooks of neoliberal theory – provided the intellectual cover to hand over the control of agricultural commodity markets to large corporations, many with intimate ties to the ruling party.

The cracks in this façade shone a light on the anti-social impact of the neoliberal era in India, which began in 1991. This light burned bright, refusing to be dimmed by media conglomerates and holy

men, who began to praise the government for preventing even more deaths. But that light did shine through, and it made an impact on mass consciousness, even if it did not result in immediate electoral gains for the opposition parties.

In June 2021, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research published our assessment of the farmer's protest in dossier no. 41, *The Farmer's Revolt in India*. That dossier provided an understanding of how neoliberal policy has undermined Indian farmers and landless peasants, increasing inequality and misery in the countryside. This dossier, *The Condition of the Indian Working Class*, offers a broad analysis of the living and working conditions of India's large and diverse working class.





Birender Kumar Yadav, *Government Work Is God's Work*, 2017. LED light installation projected onto the entrance of the Mumbai Art Room.

## The Lockdown

On 24 March 2020, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced – without notice – a 'total lockdown' for the country's population of 1.4 billion. Small and medium-size businesses, which employ most of India's workforce, pulled down their shutters. Due to the lockdown, at least 120 million workers, or 45 percent of India's non-agricultural workforce, lost their jobs. Employers were under no moral or legal obligation to pay their workers, many of whom did not even receive their back wages. Some workers only had a few days' worth of food in hand while others found themselves with no money or food at all, and many were expelled from the shantytowns where they lived. Faced with public pressure and the possibility that hundreds of millions of people would starve because of this unplanned lockdown, the government announced a meagre support package on 26 March that totalled less than 1 percent of India's gross domestic product.

The lockdown demonstrated the fragility of the Indian working class: only a small push was needed to throw vast sections of the workforce into homelessness and hunger. Workers in cities, almost all of them migrants from far-away towns and villages, had neither any significant support from the government nor the security of community and family networks.<sup>1</sup>

Tens of millions of desperate migrant workers defied the curfew and walked thousands of kilometres to their home villages. For them, the villages represented shelter, security, and some form of dignity.



Some flocked to railways and bus stations in search of transportation while others took to the national highways on foot. Millions of other workers, including those whose villages were too far to brave such a journey, remained in the cities and depended on the kindness of strangers. Trade unions, left political parties, employees on salaries (mainly bank workers and internet technology workers), sensitive individuals, and others hurriedly formed groups to provide food and water to the workers and help them to return their villages. The reaction from the state was characteristic: the police stopped workers at state borders; sprayed industrial bleach at them through water cannons, allegedly to sanitise them; confiscated their bicycles; and beat them as they violated the curfew. No corporations stepped forward to bear responsibility for the workers' welfare, their attitude as callous as that of the government.

Trapped in cities, hundreds of millions of workers had to face the pandemic in the worst possible conditions. Nearly half of urban India and the majority of the urban working class lives in slums, where the air is fetid and the surroundings squalid. Light barely penetrates the narrowly packed brick boxes and sheds, a few inches separating each dwelling from the other. Families are packed tightly into narrow rooms, where privacy and breathing space are alien. Migrant workers pile on top of each other in single rooms with their meagre belongings. In most of these slums, which do not have proper drainage systems, the surroundings becoming toilets. The social catastrophe is hard to describe: workers fall into collapsed septic tanks, drowning in filth; gas cylinders, the main form of cooking energy, explode because their production is effectively unregulated; neighbourhoods turn into swamps during the heavy monsoon

rains, with dysentery, dengue, malaria, and typhoid given free rein. The pandemic was just one more burden for the workers. Confined to claustrophobic slums, where social distancing is impossible, they watched as the virus swept through their communities. Out of sight, out of mind: that was the attitude of the Indian government and elite.

The scale of the terror invoked by COVID-19 could not be concealed. Corpses of the working class and the poor were seen floating down the Ganges River and piling up in crematoria and graveyards across the country. The government began to bury the numbers, underestimating infections and casualties despite the clear evidence and first-hand knowledge in working-class areas of high rates of infection and death. A government that had overseen the evisceration of the public health system and that had turned over the pharmaceutical industry to the private sector certainly seemed more invested in the health of the 'market' and of the billionaires than in the health of the workers.

Two Indian pharmaceutical companies had a duopoly in the country's COVID-19 vaccines. Even as the pandemic spiralled out of control, the government procrastinated bringing in the more than capable public-sector companies to increase the production of vaccines. Given that one of the vaccines was developed by government research institutes, the public sector could easily have been tasked with ramping up the production and delivery of vaccines. What was clearly in the public's best interest was not in the best interest of capital. Rather than intervene in the worst public health crisis seen in the country's history, the Indian government stood by as private

firms made enormous profits and neglected to vaccinate India's working class. One of these two pharmaceutical companies made a profit of up to 2,000 percent per a single dose while the other made a profit of up to 4,000 percent.<sup>2</sup> From March 2020 to March 2022, the profits of India's big businesses doubled, as did the wealth of the country's billionaires.<sup>3</sup>



Detail of: Birender Kumar Yadav, *Debris of Fate*, 2015. Indian ink on debris.

## Workers in the Era Before Liberalisation

In 1944, four years before the British imperialists were ejected from India, a group of Indian capitalists drafted a text called the Bombay Plan. These capitalists acknowledged that in an independent India, the industrial sector would need to be protected from international competition and given resources to flourish. This protectionist theory is called the ‘infant industry’ thesis. Drawing from the Bombay Plan, the new Indian state developed an industrial policy (1948), set up a planning commission (1950), produced the first Five-Year Plan (1951–1956), crafted the Industrial Policy Resolution (1956), and passed the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act (1969). The new Indian government’s policy – drafted alongside private-sector industrialists – was to carve out some areas for the private sector and to ensure that no private-sector conglomerates could dominate any one sector. However, there was no democratisation of the Indian economy through land reforms or through the provision of workers’ rights, allowing the bourgeoisie to benefit greatly in the early years of independent India. In 1960, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru conceded that his government’s policies had intensified social inequality:

Large numbers of people have not shared in [the increase in the nation’s wealth] and [they] live without the primary necessities of life. On the other side you see a smaller group of really affluent people. They have established an affluent

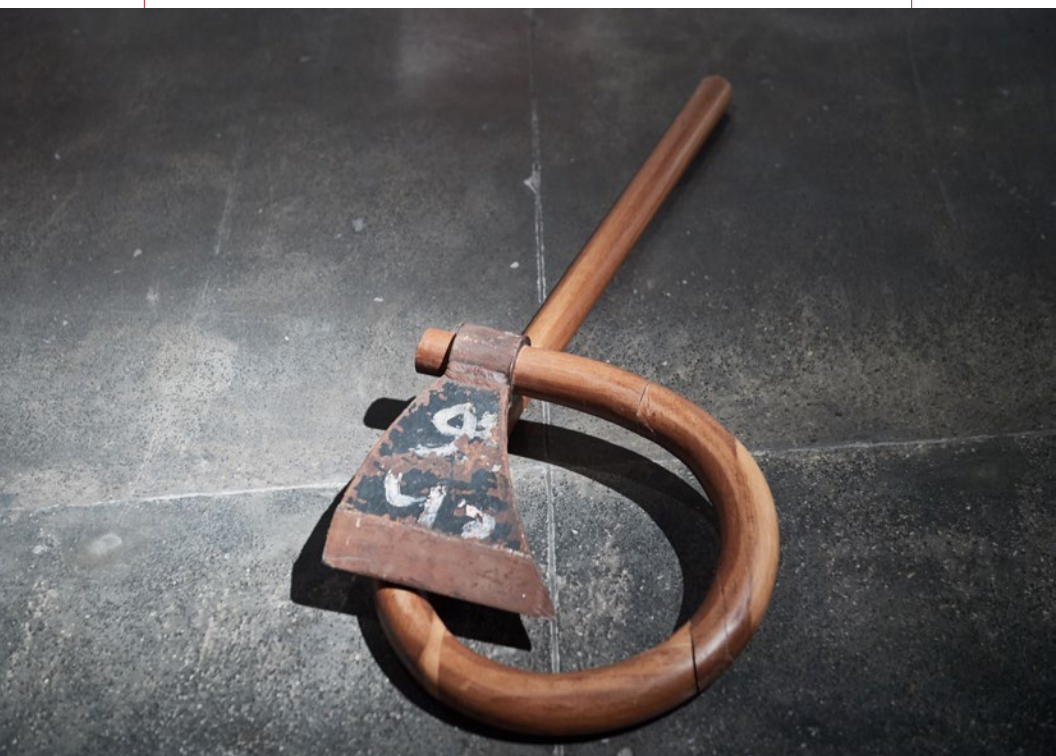
society for themselves anyhow, though India as a whole may be far from it... I think the new wealth is flowing in a particular direction and not spreading out properly.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike in socialist countries, the public sector in India was built for a limited purpose – to facilitate the growth and accumulation of the private sector. The *raison d'être* of the Indian public sector was not to maximise profits, but to provide a sustainable ecosystem for private industry – hence the investments in infrastructure and inputs like heavy machinery and steel, which in the absence of the public sector would have had to be imported from Western countries at very high costs.

Strong workers' movements fought to build key trade unions that intervened to ensure that legislation regarding work hours, wages, benefits, and collective bargaining would be implemented, strengthened, and expanded to include more and more of the workforce. There are three reasons why public-sector workers were able to make these gains: first, because the capital-intensive nature of the public sector and subsequent concentration of workers in large factories allowed strikes to inflict rapid damage on profits; second, because the largely undereducated and underfed population meant that the reserve army of labour to undercut the skilled public-sector workers was not always available; and third, because of the tradition of struggle and the trade union culture that developed in these factories, the public-sector workers developed high levels of class consciousness. However, the restriction of the public sector to capital-intensive industry and the proportionally small number of its workers in the labour force ensured that only a small segment of the Indian working class could access

these rights. Nevertheless, the rights of public-sector workers set a benchmark for the rest of the working class, which fought, alongside the highly class-conscious public-sector workers, to extend labour legislation to cover all workers.

This is significant given that in India, 83 percent of the workforce is in the informal sector, consisting of a multitude of small, unincorporated enterprises alongside household and precarious work. Even in the formal sector, a significant percentage of employment is informal in nature (such as subcontracted work), bringing the total of informally employed workers to more than 90 percent of the labour force.<sup>5</sup> For these workers, laws and rights are a fantasy: most of them do not even earn the minimum wage, despite the fact that it is set just above hunger levels. Due to the lack of protections, these workers are forced into irregular and seasonal contracts, including daily wage contracts, which deprive them of reliable sources of income. The informal and unregulated nature of work has meant that – even before liberalisation – unionisation has long been alien to these workers. Only in states where the Left is or has been in power – such as Kerala, Tripura, and West Bengal – have workers been able to attain legislation that has improved their working conditions and allowed them to unionise. In these states, workers have had a higher share of income.



Birender Kumar Yadav, *An Axe on One's Own Foot*, 2015. Iron and wood.



## Labour Market Reform Since 1991

In 1991, the Indian government made an agreement with the International Monetary Fund to liberalise the economy in exchange for short-term financial assistance. This included the government's commitment to 'reform' the labour market and further open up the partly protected Indian economy to foreign capital. The era of the Bombay Plan was over.

India was attractive to foreign capital not only because of the size of its internal market, but also because of its large pool of workers who were being paid criminally low wages. Over the years since independence, workers remained underpaid and underfed, but there was a significant change: a large section of them had become literate. This technically skilled and more ambitious workforce emerged by the 1980s and continued to expand due to the government's investment in vocational and technical training, the fight for increased educational opportunities for children, and the agrarian transformation that produced new aspirations among the children of farmers and peasants. However, there was no expansion of employment to accommodate them. It was this large army of underpaid, underfed labour, accustomed to working in what are likely some of the worst working conditions in the world, but now with new aspirations and literacy, that awaited the exploitation of international capital on the eve of liberalisation.

The corporate sector pushed a full-spectrum media campaign against workers, making the argument that they were entitled and lazy and

that there needed to be ‘flexibility’ in this new age of globalisation. Many academic and policy institutions jumped on the bandwagon to make the case for ‘labour market flexibility’. The general orientation of this argument is that labour must work at the whim of capital, which should not be ‘captive’ to regulations about employment and wages and must be allowed to pay wages according the simple principle of supply and demand, uninfluenced by any responsibility to maintain workers’ living standards. Such a scenario – despite the social costs to workers – would bring in foreign investment, they argued, which would allegedly raise the general technological level of industry and further increase labour productivity, thereby increasing both growth rates and wage levels in the long term.

Two impediments lay before this golden road to growth: public-sector trade unions, which continued to resist the doctrine of ‘flexibility’, and the existence of labour laws. One important illustration of the resistance of trade unions is the fight at the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, led by workers and joined by the public, who, together, have staved off multiple privatisation attempts over the course of a decade.<sup>6</sup> Faced with challenges from the unions, the government moved towards a comprehensive solution not to fight the unions factory by factory, but to change the law in its favour, assisted, since 1991, by a judiciary aligned with the neoliberal agenda. In the early years of liberalisation, the Supreme Court ruled that contract workers at Air India could become permanent workers in certain cases. But in 2001, the court reversed this judgement following an appeal from the Steel Authority of India and other public-sector firms, thereby nullifying the gains that workers had made through decades of struggle. This assault on contract workers came alongside other industrial disputes,

such as a concerted attempt to ban strikes. Then, on 6 August 2003, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Tamil Nadu state government's dismissal of 170,000 employees on the grounds that they had been on an 'illegal strike'. Only if the workers offered an unconditional apology, the Supreme Court said, would the government have to rehire them. Crucially, the Supreme Court concluded that 'there is no question of [government employees] having any fundamental, legal, or equitable right to go on strike', further stating that trade unions do not have 'a guaranteed right to an effective collective bargaining or to strike' and that '[N]o political party or organisation can claim that it is entitled to paralyse the industry and commerce in the entire state and is entitled to prevent the citizens not in sympathy with its viewpoints from exercising their fundamental rights or from performing their duties for their own benefit or for the benefit of the state or the nation'.<sup>7</sup> This judgement not only went against Indian laws: it also violated a range of International Labour Organisation conventions that the Indian government had signed over the years.

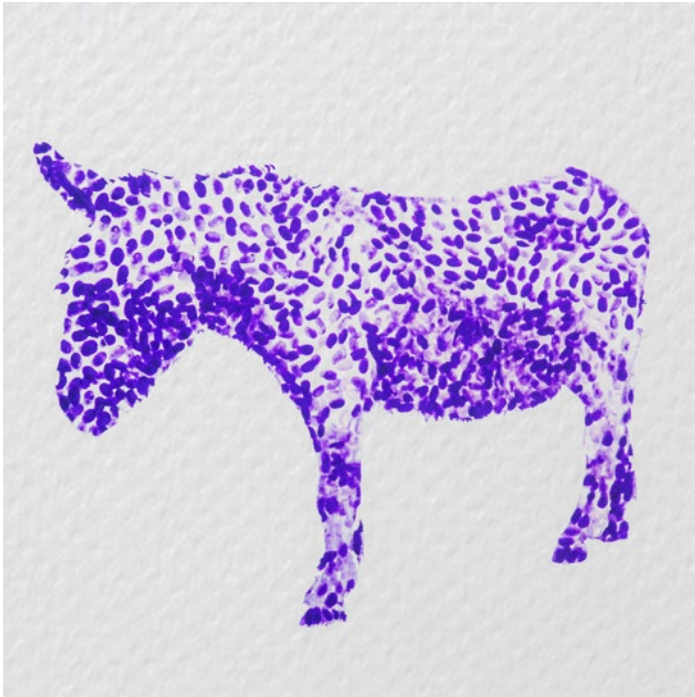
Over the course of the past few decades, there has been a change in the higher judiciary's approach towards disputes between workers and management as well as the working class's right to collectively protest and go on strike – a change that favours market principles and the sanctity of the contract. The judiciary's views have allowed capital to open up a ruthless campaign against workers, but this has not stopped them from fighting back, as is evident from workers' struggles, from the Maruti Suzuki factory in Manesar (Haryana) and the Volvo Buses factory in Hoskote (Karnataka) to the *anganwadi* (crèche) workers of Gujarat and the ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers of Punjab. Workers' attempts to

form unions have nonetheless been treated as criminal actions. As Maruti Suzuki's Management Executive Officer S. Y. Siddiqui put it in June 2011, 'The problem at Manesar is not one of industrial relations. It is an issue of crime and militancy'. Furthermore, the firm, he said, would not 'tolerate any external affiliation of the union', warning the unionised workers that any attempt to find political allies amongst the national labour federations to help their fledgling struggle would be met with retaliation from the company.<sup>8</sup> In the face of continued worker struggles, the government has turned to using anti-terror legislation to arrest workers and subdue their right to strike. For instance, in 2017, when contract workers for Reliance Energy unionised and went on strike for a few hours demanding compensation for the death of a worker, five of them were arrested on terrorism charges.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, violence against union organisers along the Gurgaon-Manesar-Dharuhera-Rewari stretch (in northern India) is mirrored in the Coimbatore-Chennai belt (in southern India). The immanent violence in both of these zones led to industrial actions that resulted in workers' deaths, such as the 2012 murder of Awanish Kumar Dev at the Maruti Suzuki plant and the 2009 murder of Roy George of Pricol Limited in Coimbatore (in the state of Tamil Nadu). In 2009, after the uprisings in Coimbatore, Jayant Davar, the president of the Automotive Component Manufacturers Association of India, put it bluntly: 'We can't be a capitalist country that has socialist labour laws'.<sup>10</sup>

Proponents of 'labour flexibility' argued that this approach would attract foreign capital and increase labour productivity and economic growth. Decades after its implementation, however, the data contradicts the theory. Instead, growth has slumped and so

has employment – especially full-time, formal employment – as the workforce has increasingly shifted to a model of short-term contracts with minimal regulatory oversight and benefits. Due to deteriorating working conditions, the share of profits and wages has diverged significantly: from 1999–2000 to 2018, the share of profits increased from 17 percent to 48 percent while the share of wages decreased from 33 percent to 26 percent.<sup>11</sup> Profits are now the national interest, and struggling workers are terrorists.

Divisive labour practices have decimated trade unions in private-sector industry and have created difficulties for the unions of the public-sector industry. This has led to hierarchies of exploitation between formal and contract workers, which most acutely impact the most exploited sectors and cause an atmosphere of resentment between workers on the shop floor. Struggles that largely focus on bargaining over wages are unlikely to rally united mobilisations, except in extraordinary circumstances.



Birender Kumar Yadav, *Donkey Worker*, 2015. Thumbprints of migrant workers on paper.

## Working-Class Desperation

Employment generated by the neoliberal dispensation is work for the desperate. The promise of large-scale industrial investment and the creation of high-quality industrial jobs did not materialise in a significant way, and both economic and industrial growth have remained at low levels not only because of the lack of investment, but also because of the suppressed demand of the Indian population. This demand was reduced because of the desperately low wages of much of the population as well as neoliberal restraints on public spending, particularly in the agrarian sector.

Since 1991, there have been two periods of significant economic growth in India, but neither of them are due to 'labour market reforms' or neoliberal policies in general. The first, from 2003 to 2008, was generated by the spillover from the credit-fuelled demand of US consumers, and the second, from 2009 to 2011, was generated by credit-fuelled spending by Indian corporations as they borrowed vast sums of soon-to-be defaulted loans from Indian public-sector banks to build infrastructure, such as power plants and roadways. These bubbles are not sustainable, since US consumer demand has flattened and since Indian firms are not willing to increase investment in the face of depressed demand, which is reflected in the vastly unutilised capacity of the country's industry. Private conglomerates continue to borrow from public-sector banks, but they do so to fund acquisitions rather than create employment.

These large conglomerates, which are able to borrow astronomical amounts of capital from public-sector banks, employ – at their peak – no more than 2 percent of India’s workforce and no more than 5 percent of the non-agricultural workforce.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the majority of India’s workers are hired by small enterprises, which face an entirely different reality. In these firms, which are often strapped for credit, the wage bill takes up the majority of the operational costs, there is little ‘value addition’ during the production process, the profit margins are slim, and there is relatively little access to capital. These small, scattered enterprises have limited market power, which means that they cannot mobilise the political power needed to access public resources at scale. The only way for these small enterprises to accumulate profits and capital, then, is to squeeze workers. In these sectors – almost completely unregulated – workers are overworked and underpaid, with few rights as compared to those in the formal sector. During market swings, these firms perish, as happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their reliance on cheap labour limits the likeliness, or even the possibility, that they will improve working conditions, which is why their workers require direct state support during an emergency such as the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the informal sector is mostly made up of a wide array of service workers who are either employed by small businesses or are ‘self-employed’. A large number of these small businesses, such as shops and restaurants, each employ a handful of workers, many of them hired daily and paid in cash or in kind. Another large section of workers in the informal sector sell their labour directly to consumers. This includes auto drivers, domestic workers, electricians, load carriers, manual scavengers, mechanics, plumbers, rickshaw



pullers, ragpickers, road sweepers, and security guards. Most of them have neither an employer nor a stable occupation, and many of them hold multiple jobs. For many of these workers, there is a continuum between rural and urban spaces, as they travel to their villages during the sowing and harvest seasons either to work on their family farms or to hire themselves out as agricultural workers. These are the footloose workers of modern India.<sup>13</sup>

The development of road networks made possible the perpetual circulation of desperate workers, creating a massive reserve army of labour for the informal sector in both urban and rural areas. The expansion of mobile networks and the availability of more affordable mobile phones allow these informal workers to be in constant contact with labour recruiters (known as ‘jobbers’) and with their families and friends who alert them about the possibilities of employment on a daily or seasonal basis. These workers come from the most disenfranchised and oppressed castes of rural India. Some of them chase agricultural seasons across the country while others seek out construction projects in far-off cities. These migrant workers live in temporary dwellings at the edge of the fields or construction sites, often tents made of old sarees and plastic sheets that have no kitchens or toilets – only the open air. Children play in the rubble or are slung onto the backs of their mothers as they carry heavy loads up ladders or into the fields. The food that the migrants grow is not eaten by them, and the homes that they build are not for them. They work, and having worked, move on to new temporary worksites to work some more.

Migration puts distance between families, particularly across generational lines, draining the youngest and most able-bodied sections of communities to far-flung places in search of work that offers no security for their futures. It is not uncommon to see older men and women who were once casual workers now reduced to begging or to early deaths as they face large out-of-pocket expenses in the predominantly private healthcare sector, which push 55 million Indian every year into poverty.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the Indian pension system is abysmal, dispensing meagre, and often irregularly paid, sums far below the cost of living (as low as Rs. 200 per month for many).<sup>15</sup>

As road networks developed across the country, regional disparities in industrialisation widened. Much of the industrial production concentrated in peninsular India and in mining regions, attracting private capital to areas where the needed infrastructure had already been developed. Migrant workers travel vast distances to these sites, alienated culturally and linguistically in their new, temporary homes. This alienation also means that they are often unable to mobilise community support for their struggles, from condemning cases of extreme abuse to demanding higher wages and better working and living conditions. As the journalist Siddhartha Deb writes, 'It is an arrangement that suits employers everywhere well, ensuring that the workers will be too insecure and uprooted to ever mount organised protests against their conditions and wages. They are from distant regions, of no interest to local politicians seeking votes, and they are alienated from the local people by differences in language and culture'.<sup>16</sup> A powder keg of conflicting regional, linguistic chauvinism is being filled up for future detonation.

Small businesses and industrial firms face significant challenges, from the disadvantage compared to the economies of scale enjoyed by large conglomerate to the enormous challenges posed both by the Indian government's demonetisation scheme, which, overnight, withdrew 86 percent of the cash in circulation in the economy in 2016, and by its implementation of the General Service Tax (GST) in 2017.<sup>17</sup> Demonetisation was a blow to small business that depended on cash transactions for sales, purchases, and wage payments. The new GST regime, meanwhile, placed a heavy regulatory burden on small firms as it significantly raised their overhead costs by increasing the cost of compliance, while for large firms it improved the ease of doing business across states. These two processes wiped out many small firms, which resulted in a loss of employment for the most vulnerable workers. Furthermore, the firms that were shuttered during the pandemic provide an opening for large conglomerates to expand.

The data on Indian workers is unreliable. The official unemployment rate stands at 8 percent, although some estimates place the actual rate far higher. Work participation rates remain low, at approximately 40 percent, and the income of the median Indian worker is Rs. 10,000, which is below the minimum wage.<sup>18</sup> With 410 million workers in a population of 1.4 billion people, every Indian worker needs to earn enough wages to provide for 3.5 people, which means that they must do so on less than the minimum wage.<sup>19</sup>



Birender Kumar Yadav, *May Day*, 2022. Iron, wood, and charcoal on paper.

## The Workers' Revolt

Class struggle is not the invention of unions or of workers. It is a fact of life for labour in the capitalist system. The capitalist buys the worker's labour power, seeking to make it as efficient and productive as possible, and retains the gains from this productivity, sloughing off the worker to their slums at night to figure out a way to summon the energy to come back the next day. This pressure for the worker to be more productive and to donate the gains of their productivity to the capitalist is the essence of the class struggle. When the worker wants a larger share of the output, the capitalist does not listen. It is the power to strike that provides workers with a voice to enter the class struggle in a conscious way.

Since the late 1990s, Indian trade unions have joined together to call for a general strike against liberalisation almost every year, with roughly 200 million workers participating as of 2022.<sup>20</sup> How did so many workers – most of them in the informal sector – join this strike?

As a result of the fights led by informal workers (mainly women workers in the care sector), trade unions have begun to take up the issues of informal workers as issues of the entire trade union movement over the course of the past two decades. Fights for permanency of tenure, proper wage contracts, dignity for women workers, and so on produced a strong unity between all the different sections of workers, whose militancy is now channelled through the organised power of trade union structures. Similarly, women workers do not

see issues that pertain to them as women's issues, but as issues that all workers must fight for and win, as is also the case with issues that impact workers along lines of race, caste, and other social distinctions. Furthermore, unions have been taking up issues impacting social life and community welfare, arguing for the right to water, sewage connections, and education for children as well as against intolerance of all kinds. These community struggles are an integral part of the lives of workers and peasants.

At the same time, the ideas of the right wing – notably manifested in Hindutva (the core ideology of Hindu supremacists) – have begun to take root in Indian society, including in sections of the working class. The right wing has found fertile ground in the socioeconomic conditions generated by neoliberal capitalism, such as the invisibility and alienation that workers experience in urban areas, the indignities of everyday life, the isolation and toxic socialisation engendered, especially, in men separated from their families, the solace offered by religious gatherings, and the search for community and identity. With the waning influence of secular and rational ideologies in the country and the general narrowness of the working-class movement, there has been no significant force to counter this. A working class high on Hindutva and the hallucinations of a Hindu state (*Rama Rajya*) turning its misery and humiliation on fellow workers of a different religion or caste and finding empowerment through degrading fratricide is the neofascist prescription to control workers. What delays a united, full-blown neofascist agenda across the country is the presence of regional nationalities, particularly in southern India. Nonetheless, the potential of working-class and peasant resistance to this kind of neofascist agenda was evident in the farmers'

movement, for instance, when farmers and peasants from a range of backgrounds took the fight against big capital to the streets.

The pandemic shed light on the clear incompatibility of the interests of the working class and capital. The former lie in public investment, generating employment, taxing corporations to generate funds for the welfare of the working class, and bolstering agriculture and small industries. Given the structure of the working class and numerical weakness of organised workers, the confrontation with capital can only be successful when it goes beyond the shop floor and wage bargaining to compel the state on a deeper, and political, level. This is easier said than done, as the left wing of the trade union movement knows well. Yet, the pandemic has the potential to open a window into and expand workers' class consciousness, countering the ideological and media apparatus of capital which only obfuscates the contradictions facing society.

In August 1992, textile workers in Bombay took to the streets in their undergarments, declaring that the new order would leave them in abject poverty. Their symbolic gesture continues to reflect the current reality of Indian workers in the twenty-first century: they have not surrendered in the face of the rising power of capital. They remain alive to the class struggle.





Birender Kumar Yadav, *Life Tools*, 2021. Charcoal and pastel on paper.



## Notes

- 1 For more, see Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *CoronaShock: A Virus and the World*, dossier no. 28, 5 May 2020, <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-28-coronavirus/>.
- 2 R. Ramakumar, 'State Governments Can Purchase Only 25% of Vaccines – Belying Centre's Claim of Equitable Policy', *Scroll*, 11 May 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/994606/state-governments-can-purchase-only-25-of-vaccines-belying-centres-claim-of-equitable-policy>.
- 3 Mahesh Vyas, 'Record Profits by Listed Companies', Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, 31 May 2022, <https://www.cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?kall=warticle&dt=20220531171446&cmsec=206>.
- 4 Government of India, *Problems of the Third Plan: A Critical Miscellany* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1961), 49–50. [http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/9268/1/PROBLEMS%20IN%20THE%20THIRD%20PLAN%20A%20CRITICAL%20MISCELLANY-VB\\_PCL-49232.pdf](http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/9268/1/PROBLEMS%20IN%20THE%20THIRD%20PLAN%20A%20CRITICAL%20MISCELLANY-VB_PCL-49232.pdf)
- 5 Government of India, *Periodic Labour Force Survey* (New Delhi: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, July 2020 – June 2021).
- 6 Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *The People's Steel Plant and the Fight Against Privatisation in Visakhapatnam*, dossier no.

- 55, 23 August 2022, <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-55-visakhapatnam-steel-plant/>.
- 7 T. K. Rangarajan v. Government of Tamil Nadu & Others, Case no.: Appeal (civil) 5556 of 2003 (New Delhi, 6 August 2003), <https://main.sci.gov.in/judgment/judis/19215.pdf>, 5.
  - 8 Vijay Prashad, *No Free Left: The Futures of Indian Communism* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2015), 218.
  - 9 Jyoti Punwani, 'How 5 Reliance Workers Fighting for a Better Deal Found Themselves in Jail on Terrorism Charges', *Article 14*, 29 July 2021, <https://article-14.com/post/how-5-reliance-workers-fighting-for-a-better-deal-found-themselves-in-jail-on-terrorism-charges-61020ec49f652>.
  - 10 Peter Wonacott, 'Deadly Labour Wars Hinder India's Rise', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 November 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB125858061728954325>.
  - 11 Subodh Varma, 'Modi's Rule Is Boosting Profits, Squeezing Wages', *NewsClick*, 24 September 2018, <https://www.newsclick.in/modis-rule-boosting-profits-squeezing-wages>.
  - 12 Government of India, *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)– Annual Report* (New Delhi: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, July 2020 – June 2021).
  - 13 Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
  - 14 Taran Deol, 'India's Persistently High out-of-Pocket Health Expenditure Continues to Push People into Poverty', *Down to*

- Earth*, 22 September 2022, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/india-s-persistently-high-out-of-pocket-health-expenditure-continues-to-push-people-into-poverty-85070>.
- 15 Express News Service, '14 States Give Rs 500 or Less as Pension, Says Report', *The Indian Express*, 29 September 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/14-states-give-rs-500-or-less-as-pension-says-report-5378783/>.
  - 16 Siddhartha Deb, *The Beautiful and the Damned: A Portrait of the New India* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), 170.
  - 17 Shruti Srivastava and Archana Chaudhary, 'Amidst the Digital Push, GST Transition Will Be Painful for SMEs', *The Economic Times*, 23 May 2017, [https://ecoti.in/hR\\_02a](https://ecoti.in/hR_02a).
  - 18 Mrinalini Jha and Amit Basole, 'Labour Incomes in India: A Comparison of PLFS and CMIE-CPHS Data' (CSE Working Paper no. 46, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, February 2022), [https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Jha\\_Basole\\_PLFS\\_CPHS\\_Labour\\_Incomes.pdf](https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Jha_Basole_PLFS_CPHS_Labour_Incomes.pdf).
  - 19 Mahesh Vyas, 'Employment and Unemployment Rise in December', *Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy*, 2 January 2023, <https://www.cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?kall=warticle&dt=20230102130713&msec=290#:~:text=Thanks%20to%20this%20steady%20increase,pandemic%20month%20of%20January%202020>.
  - 20 Peoples Dispatch, 'Millions Strike in India Against Modi Government's Policies', *Peoples Dispatch*, 30 March 2022, <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/03/30/millions-strike-in-india-against-modi-governments-policies/>.



Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0  
International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

This publication is issued under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license. The human-readable summary of the license is available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.









Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research  
*is an international, movement-driven institution  
focused on stimulating intellectual debate that serves  
people's aspirations.*

[www.thetricontinental.org](http://www.thetricontinental.org)

Instituto Tricontinental de Investigación Social  
*es una institución promovida por los movimientos,  
dedicada a estimular el debate intelectual al servicio de  
las aspiraciones del pueblo.*

[www.eltricontinental.org](http://www.eltricontinental.org)

Instituto Tricontinental de Pesquisa Social  
*é uma instituição internacional, organizada por  
movimentos, com foco em estimular o debate intelectual  
para o serviço das aspirações do povo.*

[www.otricontinental.org](http://www.otricontinental.org)