



NREGA Sangharsh Morcha

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NREGA Dharna, Day 2, 3rd August 2022

500+ NREGA workers from across 15 states gathered in Jantar Mantar for the second day of the dharna today. Workers from Haryana, U.P., Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka gave testimonies about the hardships they have faced owing to persistent delays in wage payments, on how they did not get work when they demanded it, and about how no compensation was provided when workers were injured or even killed at the workplace. Many raised concerns regarding the introduction of the NMMS app for attendance at worksites and other technological interventions making it difficult to work in NREGA.

Several workers' delegations visited the MPs of their states to share their grievances and demands. Memoranda and the charter of demands was presented to the following Members of Parliament: R. Krishnaiah (YSRCP), Uttam Kumar Reddy (INC), Dhiraj Sahu (INC), Diya Kumari (BJP), Jagannath Sarkar (BJP). The documents were also submitted to the Samajwadi Party office. Some of these MPs received the charter of demands and some of them expressed their support and assured to raise it in the parliament. D. Raja, the General Secretary of the CPI and Kavita Krishnan of CPIML attended the dharna and endorsed all the demands.

Currently, more than Rs. 21,850 crores of wages are pending since April 2020¹. This year's pendency is already Rs 6,800 crores. In particular, no wages for West Bengal have been processed since December 2021 and current dues are above Rs. 2,500 crores. An analysis done of 18 lakh wage invoices of the first half of FY 21-22 showed that only 29% of payments were processed within the mandated 7 day period by the Government of India (GoI). There is enough evidence suggesting that inadequate funds allocation lead to wage delays. As of July 31, 66.4% of the budget has already been spent with 8 months remaining in the FY.

Corruption in NREGA is a genuine concern and social audits have been mandated primarily to curtail corruption. However, Rakshita Swamy of SAFAR and Karuna M., of PHM Tamil Nadu highlighted how funds for social audits have been curbed by the GoI itself. In a circular dated 5th January 2022, the Ministry of Rural Development said that social audits are a "pre-requisite" for fund release to States. On the one hand, the GoI is curtailing funds for NREGA on grounds of increased corruption and on the other, it has curtailed funds for social audits. There will be a detailed note on the issue of corruption in NREGA in the release tomorrow.

The alarming situation of food insecurity in the country and the need for greater investments in food entitlement was highlighted. Workers spoke about the difficulties in affording even two meals a day due to high inflation with a gas cylinder costing more than Rs. 1000. Mandvi, a worker from Bihar asked to end the "Ram Mandir politics" and ensure food security. There were demands to universalise PDS and have quotas for NFSA based on 2022 population projections to be in compliance with Supreme Court orders. Further PDS must include pulses, millets and oils. The PMGKAY must be extended till such time that the pandemic continues.

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