

The strike in BSNL which started on 1st December and called off in the night of 2nd December 2010 was a solemn declaration by the three lakh BSNL workers that they will never agree to disinvestment and also retrenchment through Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) or otherwise, the proposals for which were being deliberated at the highest level in the government. The strike also focussed the urgent necessity of procuring adequate mobile phone equipments for providing telephones to the people who are waiting long for BSNL connections.

The April 20th Strike

As per the call of the Joint Action Committee of the executive associations and non-executive unions an indefinite strike from 20th April 2010 was organised on the basis of a charter of demands which included the above demands amongst others. The massive participation in the strike compelled the Minister of Communications to call the JAC for talks on the first day itself. On all the issues raised, written assurances were given for settlement on a time bound basis. While there has been substantial progress on some of the issues, the assurances were not implemented on other issues. The workers were restive due to the delay in implementation of the agreed demands.

Disinvestment / IPO and VRS

The UPA II government has started disinvestment of PSUs on a fast track. The Sam Pitroda Committee Recommendations to disinvest 30% shares of BSNL, to find a strategic partner and retrenchment of one lakh workers were part of this scheme. The BSNL management in the meantime had already adopted resolution for disinvestment well knowing that the workers are completely against it. The MNCs and the India Inc were eagerly waiting to get control over BSNL and its assets so that their cartel can completely control the telecom sector. In fact, they are much more interested in grabbing the lakhs of acres of prime land in the centre of each and every town/city that BSNL have. It is a well known fact that the disinvestment of BSNL is an important agenda of the Disinvestment Department.

In order to implement the recommendations of the Sam Pitroda Committee, another committee was set up by DOT with Member (Services), Telecom Commission as Chairman. The Joint Action Committee of BSNL Associations/Unions presented their views on the recommendations and strongly opposed any move to disinvest or introduce IPO in BSNL. The JAC also opposed retrenchment of employees through VRS. Though the report of the Member (Services) has not been published, it is well understood that in the case of disinvestment and VRS, the committee was not in favour of the same considering all aspects including stiff opposition from the workers. In order to proceed with the proposal for disinvestment, a meeting of the top officers of DOT, IT, Planning Commission, Finance, Industry etc. was being planned.

It is in this context that the Joint Action Committee met and taking stock of the entire situation decided to go on for sustained struggle against these anti worker policies.

Full preparations are necessary for any strike and the workers have to be educated about the demands. Since the demands of this strike were mainly issues connected with the financial viability, growth and expansion of BSNL, much more intensive propaganda became necessary. Pamphlets and notices explaining the demands were circulated in large numbers amongst the employees

All India Convention on 19th July 2010.

In preparation for the strike, an All India Convention was organised at New Delhi on 19th July 2010 under the auspices of the Joint Action Committee (JAC) with participation of delegates from all parts of the country. This was addressed by M.K.Pandhe(CITU), G.Sanjeeva Reddy (INTUC), and other leaders of the Central Trade Unions and Members of Parliament in addition to the BSNL Association/Union leaders. The National Convention decided to launch a powerful nationwide strike from 19th to 21st October 2010. The Convention demanded that the major issues of the workers should be discussed and settled.

State level Conventions

State level conventions were organised in almost all circles which were addressed by the union leaders. These meetings were attended by large number of workers from the respective circles. The Circle JACs printed pamphlets in the regional languages and circulated. Much enthusiasm was shown by the workers to hear the all India leaders in these conventions.

Meeting with Management, DOT

Meetings were held with the BSNL Management as also Member (Services), Telecom Commission in which the JAC leaders strongly opposed the recommendations of the Sam Pitroda Committee regarding 30% disinvestment and for retrenchment of one lakh workers through VRS. A detailed memorandum on the views of the JAC on the recommendations was submitted to the Member (Services) for forwarding to the government.

Strike Dates postponed

The JAC had decided that the three days strike to start from 19th to 21st October 2010. But in view of the festival season as also the fact that elections having been declared in Kerala and Bihar during this period, the JAC unanimously decided to postpone the strike to from 1st to 3rd December 2010.

Parliament March on 15th November 2010

Thousands of workers from almost all circles reached Delhi for participating in the Parliament March on 15th November. The procession started from Bharat Sanchar Bhawan, the corporate office of BSNL. On the way to Parliament, it was stopped near the Parliament Street Police Station, where a massive rally was held. More than 3,000 workers participated. The rally was inaugurated by Com.Basudev Acharya, M.P. and the leader of the CPI(M) in Lok Sabha. In his address he supported the genuine demands of the BSNL workers and assured that the issues will be taken up in the Parliament as also outside. Com.V.A.N.Namboodiri, Convener, JAC explained the demands of the workers in order to

save and expand BSNL. Other leaders also addressed. A Memorandum consisting the demands was presented to the Prime Minister as also to the Speaker, Lok Sabha.

Strike from 1st December 2010

The BSNL management was keeping silent even after the strike notice was given. Later some discussions took place, but no favourable decision was taken. Lunch hour demonstrations were held on 29th November 2010 at SSA/Circle levels in preparation of the strike. Press releases were issued.

The Joint Action Committee addressed letters to the Central Trade Unions, independent Federations, Central, State govt. employees movements, PSU unions and others seeking support for the indefinite strike. There was tremendous support and solidarity from central unions and other organisations. The co-ordination Committee of Public Sector TUs expressed solidarity and asked its units to observe December 1, the date on which BSNL workers start the strike as Anti- Disinvestment Day and called upon its affiliates to organise demonstrations on that date. The Confederation of Central Government Employees & Workers, All India State Government Employees Federation, All India Insurance Employees Association, Bank Employees Federation of India and other unions asked their units to organise demonstrations in support to the strike. All India BSNL-DOT Pensioners Association and BSNL Casual& Contract Workers Federation gave full support to the strike.

The strike started at 0600 hours on 1st December. The BSNL exchanges and offices throughout the country came to a standstill. The strike was so complete so that in many circles, even the Chief General Managers could not attend office. The exchanges and office were completely deserted. Huge demonstrations were organised by the striking workers. Thousands of workers participated in these demonstrations in Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore, Trivandrum and other major cities. Trade union leaders and BSNL union leaders addressed these rallies. The management at last called the JAC leaders for discussion. No decision could be reached in the dissuasions, since most of the items were connected with DOT and government.

The success of the strike on the first day enthused even the few number of workers who attended duty on the first day to join the strike. Secretary DOT arranged a meeting with the JAC in the morning of the second day, 2nd December 2010. The meeting was attended by the leaders of all the unions who gave call for strike. Though the Secretary DOT was reluctant at first to have a detailed discussion, each and every issue was discussed. The positive attitude shown by the Secretary DOT to solve the issues and his assertion to have a strong BSNL was very appreciated. The JAC again met the CMD BSNL on the same day, in which he gave assurances to sort issues concerning BSNL.

It was assured that there is no proposal at present to disinvest BSNL or issue IPO or implement VRS . The procurement of 5.5 million mobile equipment will be done immediately. Tender will be floated for another 15 million lines within a short time. Cabinet Note on Pension revision of pre-2007 BSNL retirees will be resubmitted to government without any further delay after approval of the Communications Minister and there is no proposal for unbundling of last mile copper. With regard to the 78.2% of IDA pay fixation, though there was financial difficulty the issue will be presented to BSNL Board with the fresh inputs given by the unions. The JAC met again at 2000 hours in the night on 2nd December and after considering all aspects decided to call off the strike.

Lessons from the strike

The demands of the strike were mainly intended to ensure that BSNL develops and expands as also against the anti-worker policies of the government though one or two items were financial demands of the staff. But the main thrust was against the anti-worker policies of the government. The strike can be termed as a political strike against the neo-liberal policies of the government. Some advance could be made regarding financial viability of BSNL.

Though some assurances were given on disinvestment and VRS it is only temporary. The government policy on these issues is well known. A bigger, militant and long drawn struggle with the support of the people is required to change the policy of the government. Powerful propaganda reaching the common people is necessary for such a struggle.

Unity Maintained

The fact that all the unions/associations affiliated to the Joint Action Committee stood united from the first to the last. It gave a fitting reply to the divide and rule policy and to the conspiracy of the management. The unions emphatically rejected any separate meeting with management and told firmly that any negotiation could only be held with the JAC. This unity is to be further maintained and strengthened.

The struggle will continue

The two days strike has given strength to the united movement. Even some slight vacillation in some corners were washed away in face of the united decisions which were taken after thorough discussion and exchange of views. Even the small weaknesses seen have to be corrected.

BSNL is one of the biggest PSUs in the country and employs more than 3 lakh executives and non-executives. Tens of Thousands of casual and contract workers are engaged by this PSU. It has provided telecom services to the people for more than a century and is still the service provider not only in cities and towns but in the lakhs of villages and remote areas, where the private operators are not interested to extend their service due to lack of profit.

Telecom being one of the most expanding services, there is cut-throat competition, unlimited corruption and conspiracy to capture market share. There is the unholy alliance of government, MNCs, big business and politicians to weaken the PSU operator, BSNL, so that they can raise the charges and squeeze the people. This nexus has to be broken and BSNL has to survive and expand. It is the responsibility of the working class to continue and intensify the struggle, making it a struggle of the people against the anti-people, anti-worker neo-liberal policies of the government and thus defeat its nefarious game.