In early 2013 India showed the world that trade unionism remains as important as ever: more than one hundred million workers participated in the largest strike ever organised.

The 48-hour-long strike by India’s workers – jointly called by 11 central trade unions and independent federations – brought the nation to a standstill. With undaunted determination and vigour, amidst police repression and threats by governments and employers, the general strike concluded on the midnight of 21 February 2013, depicting once again the collective strength of the Indian working class.

All trade unions, including the Congress-linked Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the BJP-linked Bharatiya Mazdoor Mazdoor Sangh (‘BMS’), came together with a 10-point charter of demands asking the government to take firm and swift measures to check price rise and strengthen the public distribution system. One of the unique demands was to fix Rs 10,000 as a minimum wage for workers.

The general strike was a massive success. More than 10 crores (one hundred million) workers participated in the strike, staying away from work for two days in protest against the UPA government’s anti-labour policies. The Sponsoring Committee of Trade Unions, which called for the strike, described it as one of the most successful and vehement protests by the working class of India.

"Demands raised by us are of the common man and for the common man. He who is being tormented by the heavy price rise as well as the anti-people policies of the Government supported us throughout the strike", said AK Padmanabhan, President, CITU. "Control of the prices of essential commodities and universalisation of the public distribution system in order to ensure food security were high on the list in our charter of demands. The strike reflects the true anger of the people against the persistent increase in prices of diesel, gas, coal, electricity, etc., the essential goods for the bare subsistence of the common people".

A curtain raiser

On 4 September 2012, a National Convention of Workers at Talkatora Stadium, New Delhi, saw the participation of representatives from all over India. There they expressed their deep concern and anguish at the totally non-responsive attitude of the Government in addressing the burning issues of the working people. Despite persistent persuasion by the entire trade union movement in the country through various countrywide programmes and agitations, all conducted in a democratic manner over the last three years, the Government did not take any concrete initiative towards addressing issues of price rise, universalisation of social security rights for workers in the unorganised sector, ensuring proper minimum wages, curbing mass-scale contractualisation, checking rampant violation of labour laws and stopping the onslaught on trade union rights. The convention, which had representatives from all central trade unions – BMS, INTUC, AITUC, HMS, CITU, AIUTUC, AICCTU, UTUC, TUCC, SEWA, LPF, and independent federations came up with a Declaration and submitted the same to the Government of India.

The convention appealed to all working people across the country and their unions/federations to respond to the call for a countrywide united struggle and to participate en masse in the action programmes to press for the fulfilment of their vital demands embracing all sections of the toiling class.

The strike preparations of all trade unions had begun with state, district, and sector-level joint conventions during September, October and November 2012, with passive resistance protests such as Satyagraha and Jail Bharo on 18 and 19 December 2012 in all the states throughout the country; and a March to Parliament on 20 December 2012, with mobilisation by unions from the states adjoining Delhi. These culminated in the national two days’ general strike on 20 and 21 February 2013.

"The trade unions had prepared for the struggle in a massive way. Unions had rigorously followed the decisions of the conventions," says DL Sachdeva, National Secretary of AITUC. "It is this rigour and vigour that made this united strike a success".

The unconvincing response

"On 16 February we had a press conference. We showed our unity in front of the media. The Government had refused to budge, and at the same time, the home ministry was getting reports about the heavy preparations for the strike", recalls Amarjeet Kaur, National Secretary of AITUC. "To ease the situation, on 17 February the government came up with the idea of a four-member high-power committee comprising AK Antony, P Chidambaram, Sharad Pawar and Mallikarjun Kharge. On the 18 February, trade union representatives met the members. The finance minister was not present at the meeting; Antony did not have much to say; and Sharad Pawar talked about floor-level wages when the demand was for a minimum wage".

"The dilly-dallying attitude made the unions more determined and they decided to proceed with the strike action."

Union leaders’ views

"The two-day strike was an unprecedented historic success and a turning point in the history of the working class", says Amarjeet Kaur. "Despite being a two days’ general strike, the response was unprecedented on the first day and on the
second day it became even more resolute. Workers from all sectors – unorganised, agriculture, non-agriculture, rural and urban, anganwadi, ASHA workers – participated in lakhs (hundreds of thousands). Contact workers joined the strike in a magnanimous way. “Anganwadi workers in various parts of the country organised road-blockade demonstrations, at block and district levels in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. They braved lathi charges by police in Bihar, where 500 anganwadi women were arrested”, states the union’s press release.

Setting aside their political affiliation to the ruling party (Congress), INTUC participated in the strike. “We separated politics from the trade union and decided to concentrate on the demands of the working class. The rights of the workers were long due and so we joined hands with other unions. It was purely a trade union struggle”, asserts Sanjeeva Reddy, President, INTUC. “The Government did not show any concern towards the genuine needs of the workers and that is what prompted us to show solidarity with the strike”, he adds.

AICCTU General Secretary Swapan Mukherjee congratulated the working class and the toiling masses for making the two-day all-India general strike an unprecedented success, braving the threats by Government, police lathi charge and arrest, and defeating the attempts of the Government to create confusion among strikers. He said that the success of the strike was a decisive mandate of working people against the policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation being pursued by the UPA government at the centre and by various state governments.

The impact of the strike

The joint release issued by all trade unions stated that the two-day national strike was successful throughout the country and that it had affected all vital sectors, bringing normal life to a standstill.

The banking system collapsed for two days. “Nearly 10 lakhs employees and officers of banks including RBI, SBI and other public sector banks, old-generation private banks, foreign banks, regional rural banks and cooperative banks participated in the strike” states CPI Venkatachalam, General Secretary, All-India Bank Employees Federation. “Because of the strike all banking transactions came to a standstill. Banking services were fully paralysed. All over the country, both in the capitals and other centres, a total of 1.4 crores cheques worth about Rs 80,000 crores could not be processed in the clearing-houses in those two days”.

Transport sector workers responded to the strike in a major way, with private and public transport buses going off the road in many states. Even movement of dozens of trains in various sections of the East-Central Railway was disrupted. Transport was badly hit in Bihar, Bhopal (capital of Madhya Pradesh), Gwalior and Guna witnessed a bandh-like situation due to public transports going off the road. Auto rickshaws and taxis, too, were off the road. In Lucknow, the state capital of Uttar Pradesh, the roads wore a deserted look as 250 city buses pulled out of regular services. Auto rickshaws also kept off the roads. Since the Uttar Pradesh State Roadways Transport Corporation (UPSRTC) employees took part in the strike, around 10,000 government buses stayed off the roads. In almost all states, commuters who ventured out had a tough time due to various modes of transport – both public and private – keeping off the road.

There was massive support for the strike across other vital sectors such as petroleum sector, telecom, mining, coal, non-coal, defence, power including atomic projects, port and dock, insurance and plantation. Even state government employees and a large chunk of teachers’ union showed solidarity. Post offices remained closed in many states; income tax offices were largely hit by the strike. Industrial workers all over the country had shut down production. Public and private industrial centres were heavily affected as well.

The Confederation of Central Government Employees (CCGE) stated that about 8 lakhs central government employees and around 5 lakhs defence civilian employees participated in the strike. According to KKN Kutty, Secretary General of CCGE, the strike was total in income tax and postal departments. The participation ranged from 60 percent to 90 percent in other central government organizations, except in the Central Secretariat. As per the union reports, the strike was total in Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Chhattisgarh; had 60 percent to 70 percent participation in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana; and was partial in other states.

The industrial areas of Gurgaon and Dharuhera in Haryana remained virtually closed with workers in all the factories—large, medium and small—joining the strike en masse. In Wazirpur industrial area, nearly 20,000 workers assembled and the ring road was jammed for hours.

Repercussions

While greeting millions of working people on the historic response to the call for the two days’ general strike throughout the country, the central trade unions reiterated that the struggle thus initiated had not come to an end, and that the struggle would continue till the demands were met. Echoing this sentiment, on 22 February member of parliament Gurudas Dasgupta of CPI raised the issue in Parliament and stated that unions did not want to resort to strikes, but would be forced to do so by the Government if their demands were not considered. He warned that if the government did not engage with unions, the nation should be prepared for another strike.

J John, labour specialist and Editor of Labour File journal, says, “the successful strike action by the workers has proved beyond doubt that trade unions are not a dead force in India. They still enjoy the support of millions of workers and have the capacity to mobilise them for collective action. It is also a wake-up call for the Government that unilateral action, in favour of capital, disregarding the agency of workers will not be tolerated anymore”.

Unions prepared rigorously for the strike, adopting a shared-platform of core demands