

Struggles Ahead

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Though belatedly, the Union Government has at last notified the Majithia Wage Board's recommendations, which have been challenged in the Supreme Court by the employers and their organisations. It is unfortunate that the Government unnecessarily delayed this notification and, thus, gave the employers an opportunity to challenge the awards even before these were notified. In fact, it was only after a strong agitation by the IJU and other constituents of the Confederation of Newspaper and News Agency Employees Unions that the Government issued the required notifications.

The notification of the awards, however, is only a partial victory. For, its provisions now are subject to the final judgment of the Supreme Court in the case filed by the employers against the very concept and philosophy of not only the Wage Board but also the Working Journalists (Conditions of Service) Act. The employers, in fact, have been trying to circumvent the provisions of this law since long by employing one stratagem after another. They have been seeking to usurp the right to the freedom of the Press by seeking to deprive the journalists of their statutory rights to defined conditions of service and job security under the Working Journalists Act. They have been doing this by taking recourse to the contract system to deprive working journalists of their job security and statutorily fixed wages. These contracts enforce upon the journalists such service and working conditions as make them subservient to the whims and fancies of the employers and managers. It is this denigration of the status of journalists and the consequent dominance of the managements that is responsible for the phenomenon of "paid news" and other violations of the code of ethics in the profession and the industry.

The IJU has all along opposed the contract system because it is employed by the Press barons to rob the journalists of almost all the rights and privileges we won after hard-fought struggles soon after Independence. Having succeeded so far in their designs to craftily deprive a large number of journalists of their rights under the Working Journalists Act, newspaper-owners have now launched a bolder attack on the community by seeking annulment of the Act and its statutory wage-fixation provisions. The objective of the employers obviously is to deprive the working journalists of the fruits of their past victories and to usurp their right to freedom of the Press. This must not be allowed to happen. And the onus for a determined struggle against this attack by the Press barons falls principally on the IJU since it is the largest, strongest and most representative organisation of the country's working journalists.

And let there be no mistake: the present attack by the owners is neither fortuitous nor intended merely to save some money. It is rather late in the day for them to attack the wage board philosophy because their nominees, too, were on these boards and duly participated in their functioning. These wage boards have been working and their awards being notified and implemented for decades. Why is it only now, when a large proportion

of journalists have been covered by the contract system, that the owners have chosen to go for the kill? Had they really been conscientious opponents of the wage board philosophy, wouldn't they have mounted this attack long ago?

The reason for this attack now is that everybody has become wise to the power of the media throughout the world. The media is no longer confined to newspapers and news agencies, but expanded exponentially to include broadcast and electronic media, besides large-scale social networking through blogs, e-magazines, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and what have you. All recent middle class movements in the world, including the anti-corruption campaigns in the country, provide ample testimony to the power of these media. No wonder, therefore, that all elite classes are getting increasingly more interested in controlling whatever media they can. And no surprise that the country's TV media is so very upset over Press Council chairman Markandey Katju's proposal that broadcast media, too, be brought under the regulatory jurisdiction of the Press or Media Council. Big business and industry, obviously, have high stakes in controlling the media, particularly in the present ruling political-economic dispensation.

The TV media's argument, voiced through former Supreme Court Chief Justice J.S. Verma, that their self-regulation has been working satisfactorily is patently weak for, as Mr. Justice Katju pointed out, even the most reputed of their news channels have a rather questionable record as the Niira Radia tapes showed. However, as you all know, the demand for fresh legislation to replace the Press Council by a Media Council to cover both the print and electronic media was made by the IJU and even the previous Press Council long before the ongoing Verma-Katju debate. The present debate does show, however, that the wide spread of the media's power has become far too overwhelming to be left unregulated, particularly when the media starts playing an activist partisan role in social and political movements. Our country since Independence has developed so far in a relatively orderly manner because of the sagacity and wisdom displayed by the titans who led its transition from the colonial set-up by trying to set up a welfare state. Let's try to continue along the same path by choosing the golden mean.

The influence and power the print, electronic and "social" media have come to wield, in fact, have created an entirely new situation in which all their stakeholders have to exercise utmost vigilance, restraint and responsibility. Not only that. There is also need that the roles of various stake-holders, including journalist and non-journalist employees, proprietors, managers, advertisers and general public as well as the state be well-defined. The growth of the various media, in fact, has been so fast and furious over the past couple of decades that they have not been able to develop even uniformly accepted norms of behaviour or standards of probity. Even the service and working conditions or the hours of work are not uniformly fixed in the electronic and broadcast media. It is hightime, therefore, that the Government set up a Media Commission to study the current state of affairs in the media and recommend adequate legislative and other measures to define the roles of all their stake-holders and regulate their working conditions and work ethics. This would, of course, involve at the very minimum the extension of the jurisdiction of the WJA to cover all the employees of the broadcast and electronic media and the

strengthening of the Act by abolishing the contract system and empowering the Wage Board machinery to consider the wage structure of all media employees.

Notwithstanding Justice Katju's poor opinion of the intellectual level of working journalists, comrades, it is they who risk their life and limb to investigate, interpret and report the everyday events of life and history as it unfolds. These creators of "instant literature" surely do not have the scholarly luxury to look for "quotations" in books and have to get these from the "hurly-burly" of real life for they can see and feel how the new information technology (IT) and consequent mobility has increased the pace of change from the industrial to the technological society and why it need not take India (or China, for that matter) as long as it took Europe to develop into a modern state.

The times ahead, friends, are a period of struggle. The IJU has always played a pivotal role in the struggle for the rights of working journalists. Newspaper owners and managements have renewed their attacks on us by seeking the undoing of the Working Journalists Act and wage board awards. They have already weakened us by resorting to mass dismissals of workmen from leading newspapers like the Hindustan Times and closing down institutions like Times of India press in Patna. Any failure to put up a bold and strong fight against the new attack will make all media the voice of big business and industry and make the freedom of the Press captive to the whims and interests of the newspaper barons. This must not be allowed to happen.

We owe it to our predecessors, the valiant fighters of the 1950s and 1960s who fought for the setting up, first, of the Press Commission and, then, the Press Council, as well as the enactment of the Working Journalists Act, to launch and uncompromising struggle for the abolition of the contract system, full implementation of the Wage Board awards, the setting up a Media Commission and the enactment of a law to provide security and protection to working journalists.

The IJU, as the strongest organisation of working journalists, must play its vanguard role and lead upfront in this struggle. Let us take the initiative in uniting the print and broadcast journalists to put up a joint struggle for these demands along with other employees of both these industries and the active participants of social networks.