

Mumbai statement (20 January 2004)

A consultation about the right to food campaign took place in Mumbai on 20 January 2004. The meeting was attended by about 50 activists from all over the country. We discussed possible activities during the next few months, in the light of the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

We discussed the ominous growth of communal and anti-democratic tendencies in the country, and the need to resist them. We all felt that our commitment to the right to food is inseparable from our commitment to social justice and democratic values, and implies firm opposition to communalism in any form. Democracy is premised on the fundamental equality of all citizens. Therefore it is incompatible with discrimination based on caste, gender, religion or other attributes. We appeal to all individuals and organisations involved in the right to food campaign to put these concerns at the centre of their work, during and beyond the forthcoming elections.

Ideas of possible activities included the following:

1. Consolidating our efforts to make the right to food and the right to work central political issues. In the context of elections this could involve public hearings, *lok ghoshna patras*, large rallies, seeking commitments from candidates, etc.
2. Calling the bluff of the government on various issues such as the “feel good” and “shining India” slogans, hollow schemes (e.g. SGRY), food exports, the use of MP/MLA funds, etc. Also, debunking the affidavits submitted by the government to the Supreme Court on food issues, and countering the government propaganda with skilful research and analysis (*aankhron ki ladai*).
3. Intensifying our campaign for the right to work, including an Employment Guarantee Act but also going beyond that. Other relevant aspects of the right to work include halting mechanisation, prompt payment of minimum wages, and livelihood opportunities for people (e.g. elderly women and the educated unemployed) whose needs are not addressed by ordinary employment guarantee programmes.

4. “Direct action” to assert the right to food and the right to work, such as “self-service” at PDS shops where people have been deprived of their entitlements, and physical obstruction of labour-displacing machinery.

5. Using the right to information to expose and curb corruption.

6. Preparing “*prachar*” material on the right to food and the right to work, and disseminate it widely.

7. Organising social audits of the implementation of Supreme Court orders on the right to food, in many different places.

8. Trying to bring new issues within the ambit of the campaign, such as land rights, the right to clean water, caste discrimination (e.g. in mid-day meals and anganwadis), the democratic control of natural resources, the access of marginalised communities to the PDS, and so on. Also, reaching out to new constituencies, such as the youth.

9. Conducting a series of training programmes to enable grassroots organisations to take up right to food/work issues more effectively in their own area.

10. Holding regional or state-level meetings to frame a campaign strategy in the context of the forthcoming elections.

Some longer-term suggestions were also made. In particular, it was felt that the right to food campaign should hold a national convention in the near future, in order to review both the activities and the structure of the campaign. Looking further ahead, it was suggested that we should work towards building a national body (somewhat similar to PUCL) with units in every gram panchayat, to act as a self-propelled watchdog of all government programmes and expose cases of corruption.