

Dear friends,

There has been an overwhelming response from groups across the country to the Lalit Mehta Shahadat Divas invitation, circulated in the last Update. Aside from further information on this event, this Update includes another announcement, on the forthcoming Mazdoor Mela on May Day in Bhim (Rajasthan).

1. Mazdoor Mela in Bhim (1 May, 2009)
2. Lalit Mehta Sahadat Divas (14 May, 2009)
3. Trouble in West Bengal
4. NREGA meeting of Right to Food groups in Gujarat

Regards,
Reetika.

1. **“Mazdoor Mela” in Bhim** (received from Aruna Roy, mkssrajasthan@gmail.com)

As in previous years we will celebrate May Day 2009 with enthusiasm, pride and resolve to continue the struggle for securing our rights and entitlements as workers and citizens. It has been nineteen years since the formation of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan on the 1 May 1990. Every year we come together at the Patia Ka Chowda mela grounds in Bhim to celebrate May Day in the form of a “mazdoor mela”. This has now taken on the texture of an annual local mela which provides ordinary people with a platform to raise, discuss, and reflect on issues of concern in an informal and open atmosphere of celebration. We write to invite you to join us in Bhim on the 30 April evening or the 1 May (see attachment).

2. Update on Lalit Mehta Shahadat Divas (14 May, 2009)

As mentioned in the last Update, Lalit Mehta Shahdat Divas is being convened on 14 May 2009 in solidarity with NREGA activists and other victims of state repression (invitation attached). There has been an overwhelming response to this announcement, and groups from all major states are expected to participate. Among those that have confirmed their participation are Anandi (Gujarat), Asha Ashram (Uttar Pradesh), Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, Jan Jagran Abhiyan (Bihar), Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Rajasthan), National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), CPI-ML (Liberation), Loknaad (Gujarat), PUCL, Commissioner’s office in the Right to Food case, Pashchim Banga Khet Majoor Samity (West Bengal), Right to Food Campaign and many others. Groups from Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are also expected to participate. We are also expecting a delegation from Raipur to speak about Binayak Sen’s case.

If you would also like to come, or would like more details, please send an email to lmshahadatdivas@gmail.com.

3. NREGA meeting of Right to Food groups in Gujarat (received from Neeta Hardikar, neetahardikar@gmail.com)

On 19th February 2009, over 130 members of the Anna Suraksha Adhikar Abhiyan (included representatives of workers, panchayat members, trade union, women's sangathans, researchers, NGOs from 10 districts) and state advisor for RTF Gujarat along with member of the CEGC met at Gujarat Vidyapith in the state level Convention on NREGA and Right to food. This was followed by consultation with the State Project Coordinator, Commissionarate, Rural Development GoG. A brief report of the same is attached.

4. Trouble in West Bengal (received from Anuradha Talwar, pbkmswb@gmail.com)

“The 100 days National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) is becoming hazardous for workers. 3 NREGS workers, including Narayan Mahto, Vice President of Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity (PBKMS) were hospitalized on 2.4.09 after being attacked at an NREGS worksite at Puncha in Purulia district.

Work on an NREGS work site at Kendadih Ledamahul Gram Sansad in Puncha was completed about 3 months ago. 259 workers, 244 of them members of the PBKMS had worked at the site. When measurement was done by the CPI(M) controlled Gram Unnayan Committee, (village development committee) about a month and a half ago, after the work was finished, workers found many of their names and the work done by them had been left out. The workers protested and asked for re-measurement. When the BDO did not respond the workers *gheraoed* the BDO on the 18th of March 2009. The BDO promised re-measurement on the 21st and later on the 25th. This was also not done.

The workers therefore protested again.

On 1.4.09, the BDO ordered re-measurement and asked the Block Sub Assistant Engineer and Up-pradhan to take up this task. On 2.4.09 nearly 100 workers were present at the work site to see that measurement was done properly. The workers began protesting when the Sub Assistant Engineer missed out certain names and some pits dug by them during measurement. The Gram Unnayan Committee members who had also come also started arguing. Within minutes, the workers were attacked by a mob of nearly 150 people armed with lathis, axes and chains.

The attack was clearly pre-planned as not only was the mob armed, it consisted of people from 6 villages namely Ledamahul, Damdahi, Kusum Tikri, Tatari, Bahadurpur and Puncha. Known local leaders from the CPI(M)- Sukhdev Murmu, Panchayat member from Damdahi, Pariskshit Sahis from Ledamahul, Manik Singh Bhuiyan from Kusum Tikri and Ananda Karmakar from Tatari led the mob. It was also clear that Narayan Mahato, a very popular PBKMS leader who is also an NREGS worker himself was their main target. Narayan Mahato narrowly escaped being killed, receiving head injuries that required 4 stitches and a spinal fracture. Malati Mahato a woman member of PBKMS had also to be hospitalized after being bruised and beaten severely when she tried to save him.

The Upapradhan Mahipal Mahato has also been hospitalized after receiving severe blows on his back.

In addition, 26 cycles belonging to the workers who fled the site were looted by the mob, while 3-4 of them were burnt at the work site itself. Workers have also complained that their job cards and bank pass books were also looted from bags where they had kept them together for the re-measurement.

The workers resorted to a 6 hours road block in front of the police station. The police finally lodged an FIR and promised to arrest the assailants within 72 hours. The BDO who had ordered the re-measurement also directed the police station to lodge the FIR. So far, 4 persons have been arrested. However, a false case has also been lodged against the people who were injured.

The above report of violence is not just a stray incidents. In Achinta Nagar Gram Panchayat, Patharpratima Block, South 24 Parganas in Village Kamdevpur, PBKMS workers was attacked at an NREGS work site, this time by a mob instigated by the local Panchayat member. The issue at stake was the fact that the PBKMS workers had got work using due process of the law, even though the Panchayat member had not wanted to give them work. Jagannath Mondal's left thumb was bitten off by Jhontu Sahu (one of the many workers deployed by the Panchayat member to threaten the workers). A section of his finger had to be amputated and his treatment continues. A criminal case has been registered. Similarly, in January, PBKMS vice president Narayan Mahato, was again attacked at Manbazar I Block during a protest at the Panchayat office where workers were demanding work. On that day also, he had to be hospitalized. Here again the mob was instigated by the Panchayat leaders and consisted of drunken men who deliberately targeted Narayan Mahato.

These three incidents throw light on the kind of violence being perpetrated to stop workers in West Bengal, who are only demanding their very basic right to 100 days of work and timely wages under NREGA.

We request you to write letters of protest to the following demanding that the security of workers in NREGS works should be ensured and that guilty persons should be punished.”