



NREGA Sangharsh Morcha

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NREGA Dharna, Day 1, 2 August 2022

Workers Demand Increased Budgetary Allocations and Timely Payment

Hundreds of NREGA workers from 15+ states gathered for a three day protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi called under the banner of NREGA Sangharsh Morcha. The crucial role played by NREGA in supporting the rural population was highlighted during the pandemic, with work demand shooting up as lakhs of migrant workers streamed home. Even now, two years into the pandemic, NREGA's demand remains high. And yet, NREGA is under attack by the government. Consistently decreasing budgetary allocations, wage payments delayed for months, negligible compensation paid for delays, and woefully low wages plague NREGA. These issues are widespread across the country.

The first day of protest was marked by the singing of protest songs, testimonies given by individual NREGA workers from different states, and enthusiastic sloganeering with some old, famous NREGA slogans: "*Har haath ko kaam do, kaam ka poora daam do*", "*Ladenge, Jeetenge!*", "*Hum apna adhikaar maangte, nahin kisi se bheekh maangte*".

Anuradha Talwar from Pashchim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samiti shared about the Morcha's demand of increasing the NREGA wage to Rs 600 a day, which roughly equals the monthly salary of the lowest paid government employees as per the recommendations of the Seventh Pay Commission. She also highlighted the situation of West Bengal, which suffers from the worst wage delays in the country – more than Rs. 2600 crores are yet to be paid over just the last 2 FYs, and no payments have been made since December 2021.

Workers from West Bengal, Telangana Bihar, and UP all highlighted the issues of delays in payments and unmet demand. Many of them have been demanding work since April with no response. They have also not received the unemployment allowance they are legally supposed to receive. The newly introduced NMMS application for marking attendance is causing much distress to workers across the country.

Political leaders also came to the event and expressed their solidarity with the mazdoors. Binoy Viswam, CPI MP from Kerala, expressed his support of the 'jal, jangal, zameen' issue, and demanded the central govt. answer the mazdoors. Hannan Mollah, 8 time MP from CPI (M) in Howrah, and the senior leader of the All Indian Kisan Sabha, spoke about the common issues of farmers and NREGA labourers. He called the government an anti-farmer, anti-mazdoor government, and gave a call for unity of movements. Yogendra Yadav also joined the protest and expressed his solidarity with the cause. Annie Raja of NFIW was also present.

Nikhil Dey and Shankar Singh of MKSS spoke passionately about the deeper issues underlying the erosion of NREGA. They emphasised the need to come together and demand greater accountability from the government, and also raised issues of freedom of speech and the right to protest.

The day ended with plans to send state-wise delegations to each state's opposition parties on the next two days of the dharna.

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