

AIDWA CEC CALL: ORGANISE MILITANT STUGGLES AGAINST PRICE RISE, HUNGER AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Mariam Dhawale

The first physical central executive committee (CEC) meeting of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) after the Covid pandemic struck in March 2020, was held on November 20-21, 2021 at the Harkishan Singh Surjeet Bhawan in New Delhi. It was also the first physical CEC meeting after the AIDWA All India conference at Mumbai in December 2019. Members from 21 states attended this meeting. President Malini Bhattacharya, along with vice-president Rampari chaired different sessions of the meeting. Patron Brinda Karat also attended the meeting.

It was a moment of great happiness to be meeting one another after two years. It was even more exciting since the prime minister was forced to declare the repeal of the three farm laws just a day earlier, marking the victory of the one year long historic farmers' struggle.

The CEC thanked all the volunteers, activists and leaders from AIDWA and fraternal organisations of Delhi who worked hard for the successful hosting of this meeting. It also thanked the Jan Natya Manch for specially performing a play for the CEC.

REPORT ON CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

After the condolence resolution, the 20-page report on current international and national developments for the period from July to November 2021 was placed by the general secretary Mariam Dhawale. It was adopted after important suggestions by 22 CEC members who took part in the two hour discussion on this report.

This period of the pandemic has been one of immense challenges and difficulties and has seen worsening of conditions for working people, and especially for women, as a result of the disastrous neo-liberal and pro-corporate policies of the BJP-RSS central government led by Modi. We have seen the back breaking price rise of petrol, diesel, cooking gas, and all other essential commodities. We have seen enormous growth in unemployment, hunger, inequalities and shrinkage of livelihoods. We have seen the shameless loot of national assets by the crony corporate lobby. Communal attacks on minorities and backward sections, assaults on democratic rights, civil liberties and constitutional institutions have been consistently launched by the saffron regime. But this period has also seen an intensification of the farmers' and workers' struggles.

There is unprecedented increase in absolute poverty, in both rural and urban areas. Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data has shown that savings have declined and debt has grown as households scramble to raise resources to meet their daily needs. Other surveys have shown that food intake has gone down since the government provided only a limited amount of free grain to ration card holders, leaving out an estimated 10 crore people. People are desperate, and just to survive, are working anywhere and at whatever wage or earning they can eke out of it. This situation is pushing people into the jaws of poverty. The situation of women in times of such intense deprivation has assumed very critical proportions. In an exploitative, patriarchal system, hunger, unemployment and poverty impacts women much more seriously.

Some of the issues raised during the discussion by CEC members were: Women's anger against price rise and hikes in the prices of gas cylinders is palpable in all meetings in bastis and villages, gas cylinders are now only decorative pieces in the house with women returning back to firewood, bus fares too have been hiked pinching the pockets of daily commuters, hike in electricity rates is leading to huge light bills, MNREGA work is scarcely available and even the wages of the workers are pending for months together, lack of employment is leading to a mountain of debts and women have to face the brunt of the recovery agents as they cannot pay the instalments. Problems faced by domestic workers have been taken up in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and some other states.

The thrust on digital education has had an enormous impact on the educational rights of poor children. Women have sold their mangalsutras for buying smart phones for their children. Survey of 111 school children in Lucknow helped in identifying their problems and this led to a protest outside Shiksha Bhavan. Aid to the aided schools had been stopped in Andhra Pradesh but restarted after protests. Fear was expressed that the new education policy will lead to closure of the anganwadis.

Availability of health services at the local level has been an ongoing struggle. AIDWA camps for provision of free vaccines were held in Kanpur. Health check-up camps were organized in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. Local campaigns for health facilities were held in Haryana.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Increasing crimes against women remains a matter of serious concern. More than one third of cases of rape are against children. AIDWA has intervened in numerous incidents of violence against women - the attack on a sportswoman; threat of rape on a six month baby; kidnapping, rape and murder of a girl student in Vaishali, Bihar; murder of the civil defense worker Rabiya; rape and murder of a minor Dalit in Delhi; issue of human trafficking in Karnataka; gang rapes and murder in West Bengal. There has been an increase in incidents

of honour killings. AIDWA has intervened in such incidents in Bhiwani and Sonapat in Haryana and also in Andhra Pradesh. AIDWA intervention and continuous follow up led to the conviction in an 18 year-old honour killing case in Tamilnadu.

COMMUNAL ONSLAUGHT

Attacks on Muslims, Christians, Dalits and women by the Manuwadi forces have increased across the country. Discrimination against them is on the rise too. Attacks on biryani cooks in Burari; opposition to allowing Muslims to pray namaz in Gurgaon; preventing Muslim vegetable and bangle vendors from selling their goods in certain areas in Madhya Pradesh; extremely poisonous anti-Muslim sloganeering by BJP activists at Jantar Mantar; Muslims not being allowed to participate in the *garba* celebrations; inter-religious relationships and marriages being targeted by the Bajrang Dal and VHP in Karnataka, communal tensions being instigated in some districts of Maharashtra and so on – the list keeps growing.

It was heartening that the Gurudwaras and some people from the Hindu community opened their premises to Muslims for praying of namaz in a show of solidarity at Gurgaon. Public meetings for communal harmony were held in Pataudi, Haryana.

FUTURE TASKS

Keeping in mind all these multifarious assaults, the CEC decided on some important future tasks with the aim of reaching out to the mass of women. The CEC clearly opined that it is very necessary for all our leaders and activists to reach out to the mass of women, work at the grass roots level, understand and fight the concrete situation at the ground level.

1. Build Larger and Militant Struggles Against Price Rise and Hunger

The CEC decided to take up the campaign against spiralling prices of essential items more vigorously. (The report of the nationwide struggle held on November 16 has been carried in the last issue.) It was decided to make all efforts to reach maximum number of women by consolidating our work in our areas of influence and expanding it into newer areas.

AIDWA will print thousands of leaflets and organise a door-to-door distribution. This task will be planned at the unit level. After the distribution of the leaflets to every house in a particular area, courtyard/village/hamlet meetings will be held to have informal discussions with women on the issue of price rise and the pro-corporate policies of the Modi government. This campaign will be carried out till the budget session of Parliament. During this session, militant struggles with maximum mobilisation of women to highlight

the issue of price rise will be organised after this intense campaign. All CEC and state committee members will take active part in this campaign.

2. Struggle for MNREGA work and Campaign for UEGS

AIDWA will identify districts and villages and take forward the struggles for demanding MNREGA work and timely payment of the wages. The demand for work in urban areas and for the Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme will also be taken up vigorously.

3. December 1 – All India Protest against Attacks on Minorities

Attacks on minorities by the saffron brigade – Muslims and Christians – have increased manifold in our country. The Left and progressive movement has given a national call to hold protests against the attacks on minorities on December 1. All AIDWA units will mobilise women and participate in these protests.

4. December 10 - International Human Rights Day

Many states have already planned various programmes – seminars, discussions, meetings, – on December 10, International Human Rights day. We must also highlight the issues of attacks on minorities, price rise of all essential commodities, unemployment and violence.

5. December 19 – Sushila Gopalan Memorial Lecture

The CEC decided to hold the third Sushila Gopalan Memorial Lecture on December 19, 2021 at Bhubaneswar, Odisha. This lecture will be delivered by the former finance minister of Kerala, Dr Thomas Isaac on the topic of ‘Growing Indebtedness and its Impact on Women in Pandemic and Neoliberal Times.’

6. Nationwide Survey on Indebtedness of Women

AIDWA has carried out a nationwide survey on increasing indebtedness among women. A national report based on the findings in the state survey reports will be prepared. This report will be released on December 19.

POLICY FOR WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

Malini Bhattacharya placed a brief note on the policy for women in agriculture which was circulated to the CEC in English and Hindi.

The National Commission for Women (NCW) had prepared a Draft National Policy for Women in Agriculture in 2009 and submitted it to the Ministry of Agriculture with a

recommendation for its adoption. The importance of this Draft Policy has to be seen in the context of the historic farmers' protests which have seen a large mobilisation of women throughout the country. The AIDWA campaign amongst rural women has been raising demands for women's Right to be recognised as farmers and workers; Right to land and natural resources; Right to food and food security; Right to livelihood and decent work; Freedom from debt; Right to regulated markets and fair prices; and Right to basic services.

MEMBERSHIP AND CONFERENCES

The agenda of membership was placed by treasurer S Punyavathi. The total membership for 2021 deposited at the centre up to now is 71,25,365. The CEC congratulated the Kerala state committee and all our activists for completing their target and enrolling 54,74,485 members – a record so far. While taking note of the tremendous efforts put in by some of the states to enrol membership in very difficult circumstances, the CEC expressed concern at the serious condition of membership enrolment in some states, and decided to complete the membership enrolment by December 31.

AIDWA will hold its 13th all India conference at the end of 2022. Delegates to this conference will be elected on the basis of the 2021 membership. The CEC has decided to start planning and holding the unit conferences from December 2021.

The attractive AIDWA diary for 2022 was distributed to all the states in this CEC meeting.