

INDIAN DREAMS, AMERICAN NIGHTMARES

In Search for Work: India to Middle East to the United States

International migration of Indians, especially working class Indians, is necessitated by the neo-liberal policies adopted by the Indian government. Most of such migrant workers are vulnerable to untold exploitation by their employers in foreign countries. They often work like slaves to fulfill their commitments to families and society. Earlier workers migrated mostly to the Middle East and other developed Asian countries.

Indian migrant workers have provided India with a steady flow of foreign exchange from their hard work and savings. In a country like India, with high unemployment and poverty, these remittances play a very important role. The Indian economy benefits greatly from the foreign exchange sent home by the Non-Resident Indians – in fact, remittances are second to Foreign Direct Investment in terms of revenue.

Recently, Indian skilled working class people have started going to the US. Along with the change in destination has come a greater hope for prosperity from working in one of the richest countries.

India to USA: Cheated by Signal, Fighting for Justice

In late May and early June of 2006, Signal International, a giant ship building company in Pascagoula, Mississippi, USA imported 590 skilled blue-collar workers from India, on H-2B visas. The workers are from different parts of India -- more than half are from Kerala and the rest belong to Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Delhi. And they belong to the aspiring Indian middle class, ready to undergo any kind of hardship just to live a middle class life.

Signal recruiting workers through American and Indian private recruiting companies and promised green cards to the workers. Based on the promises made to the applicants by the recruiters and Signal International, the workers and their families gathered their life savings and borrowed staggering sums of money from family members, friends, banks and money lenders often at higher interest rates, in order to make the payments. Many mortgaged or sold their homes, their jewelry and hard-earned assets. The workers were expecting to build a better life for themselves and their families. All of that ended like a

daydream when the workers arrived in the US and were forced to work and live under deplorable conditions.

On March 10, 2008, hundred workers decided to leave the Signal labour camps and organized themselves as Indian Workers Congress. They launched a 29 day hunger strike, demanding justice and sought the intervention of the Indian Government to pressurize the US government to grant them humanity and justice. Though they could draw extensive support from organizations and general public in US, the Indian Embassy turned its back on the victims of international labour trafficking. The Indian Government has been more ready to open dialogue with countries other than the US on labour migration issues. Once the destination of migrants became US, the Indian government has avoided the negotiation table and these migrants are paying for that, materially and mentally.

Back in India: Families Network of Solidarity & Shared Suffering

The family members of the Indian Workers Congress started organizing in India with the help of allies. They launched a one day solidarity hunger strike in Cochin, Kerala. The supporters of the families and the workers met with concerned ministries and other authorities in India. They succeeded in building up a solidarity group in India.

Two ally members visited the families in Kerala in order to make the family network strong and to give them necessary support. They traveled extensively in Kerala from north to south and had different experiences with different families. Often, families treated them as friends with whom they could share their sufferings.

Myths of Prosperity, Costs of Reality

The societies, in which the workers' family members live, now see them as families of an "American" worker prospering in the United States. They are under social and family pressure to fulfill certain status-related expectations and they feel ashamed to speak of the fraud they have faced or to reveal their sufferings and deprivation. Their sons, brothers and husbands migrated to the US expecting to provide them a better life. But things did not work out as was expected and their living standard dramatically dropped even from the time when the workers used to migrate to the Middle East. In some cases, the close family members of the workers have not even informed other family members of their hardship.

In order to live up to the expectation of others and maintain the myth of middle class comforts, some families started borrowing to maintain a fictional living standard. (It is relatively easier for them to get loans when they say that their family member is in America).

The society, churches and other institutions demand more from them, now that they are supposed to be “richer”. Children are expected to be sent to better and more expensive schools. Most of the families who sold their houses to arrange money for visa and travel are now expected to buy or build a new and better one. But, they can hardly pay the rent, let alone buy.

When they fall ill, the neighbours and friends expect them to go to expensive private hospitals – ironically, however, they are struggling to arrange even bus fare to go to public hospitals.

Along with societal pressures, the families and the workers face painful personal loss and loneliness. Some of the workers migrated to the US shortly after their marriage. They sold their wives’ jewelry to pay for their US dream. At the time of migration, they dreamt of getting green cards for the family and taking them along. Once they realized Signal’s treachery, that dream was lost and their wives are undergoing severe mental pressure of separation, deprivation etc. Some of the workers became fathers while they were away and have still not seen their new born. The wives miss them terribly and in some cases face depression.

The workers’ old parents also find themselves caught in this horrendous situation. They have been hoping for a peaceful old age when their children would look after them. Instead, in some families, old parents have gone back to work to pay back the debt and the mounting interest owed to the moneylenders and banks. During a visit to one workers’ family, the old father of the worker had gone in search of a job. The only thing we would do was to console them and give them the confidence to confront the adversities. These families are going through the worst time in their lives. Parents get sick when they think of their son and get hospitalized frequently. When the family can barely meet daily expenses, illness and hospitalization add to the economic burden and stress.

The supporters visited one family that lives in an unfinished house. The construction of the house had been started two years back but still not completed because of financial problems. The same family has three girls children exceeding the ‘age limit’ for marriage – a social problem in the society they are in. The mother in that family started crying while talking to us. She

had suppressed her emotions so much that she burst into tears and grief when she met us. What we could do was to console her by saying that there are ways for the workers to overcome this terrible situation and for that they need their families' help.

Personal is Political

Most of the families are not politically active in Kerala, which is otherwise a highly politicized state with a strong Left tradition. As a result, they are often unable to locate their personal tragedies within the larger framework of neo-liberal capitalist policies and within the working class traditions of resistance. Their grief remains private, isolating them from social and political support. Their dreams are defined by social and economic status and any loss to that status affects their respect for themselves. Unfortunately, they suffer more as they lack the support system offered by the progressive political movements in Kerala.

The allies in India have worked with the family members to form a platform from where they can raise their demands as stakeholders in the development process of the state. After all, their remittances are significantly responsible for Kerala's economic strength.

The bi-national organizing and solidarity effort has built a bridge between workers and families and between resistances at both ends. The family members are gradually getting politicized and convinced of the importance of being organized to demand that the 'sleeping government' intervene in the issue.

(The bi-national campaign for Just and Fair Migration is a collaboration between Society for Labour and Development and Indian Workers Congress Families Network in India, and New Orleans Workers Centre, Indian Workers Congress and Jobs with Justice in the United States.)