



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TATA POWER WORKERS' STRUGGLE

A Report by Jagrut Kamgar Manch
3rd September, 2004

Jagrut Kamgar Manch is an organisation of workers for the building of class consciousness among the workers. Towards this end, Jagrut Kamgar Manch has been carrying out various activities among workers, including leaflet and poster campaigns, demonstrations, and solidarity actions.

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Martyrs In The Fight Against Job Losses

**Anant Dalvi, Akhtar Khan, and the Struggle
of the project workers of Tata Power Company**

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The struggle of 70 retrenched project workers of Tata Power Company (TPC) in Mumbai has been successfully concluded. TPC has been forced to pay substantial compensation of Rs two crore: Rs 1.85 crore to the 70 workers as well as special death compensations of Rs 7.5 lakh each to the two widows. It required some nine months of struggle to achieve this.

This struggle has been an inspiring one. Mumbai in the last two decades has witnessed great setbacks to the working class movement and the terrible bleeding of the working class. In this entire period, main feature of the working class scene is of workers out and unemployed, cases going on for years in the courts. But the TPC struggle has shown once again that, instead of relying on litigation, workers can sustain a mass struggle for many months; that they can rally support from other workers; that — even in the absence of striking power — they can force a powerful management to negotiate with them through sheer mass pressure; and that, in the course of all this, they can spread a broader political message — that struggle is possible, that the workers can win if they are determined and on the correct path.

Background

The background to the struggle is as follows. A group of 70 workers who had worked for between four and 20 years on Tata Power Company projects were retrenched in 1996. They filed cases against their termination, and were promised help by, and became members of, the pro-management internal union of TPC (some of whose office-bearers had a passing selfish dispute with the TPC management). However, the TPC official union eventually betrayed the project workers, gave them deliberately wrong legal advice, and secretly prepared to sign an agreement with the management on October 3, 2003, in which the demand of jobs for the 70 project workers was dropped.

Upon hearing of this betrayal, the group of project workers went on October 3 to the Tata headquarters in the heart of Bombay's commercial district. The leader of the official union, who was to join them there, did not appear. Suddenly, the leader of the group, Anant Dalvi, and one other active worker, Akhtar Khan, doused themselves with kerosene and immolated themselves

before Bombay House. The other workers had not known of their plan in advance. Shocked, they tried to save them. Far from helping to save the two workers or providing water to douse the flames, the Bombay House management got their security guards to close the gates of the building. The workers and even members of the public began stoning the building in rage. Anant Dalvi died the same day and Akhtar Khan died after suffering for eight days in hospital.

The press gave considerable publicity to the incident; a civil liberties team of CPDR brought out a fact-finding report holding the Tatas' labour policy as responsible for the deaths; and the major trade unions issued statements condemning the Tatas and planned a protest. A crucial role was played by Jagrut Kamgar Manch (JKM), a platform for conscious workers, which devoted itself to this issue till it reached its conclusion.

JKM's opinion was that this incident differed from the many other suicides of retrenched workers which have taken place in the city. Unlike many other retrenched workers over the last decade, these two workers did not commit suicide in the privacy of their homes, but did so deliberately in front of the symbol of the corporate sector, and did so in such a fashion as to expose and condemn their employers. The two who committed this act were not isolated, mentally unbalanced or under the influence of alcohol. They had been struggling for seven years in whatever ways they knew against the capitalists (mostly by court cases, by becoming members of the official union, and by constant mutual association and keeping the workers in touch with each other). Thus, while obviously the pro-worker and genuinely democratic forces do not approve of or promote suicide as a form of struggle, it is important to recognise that, in the desperate conditions in which these workers found themselves, it was their form of *public protest against and condemnation* of the Tatas' anti-worker policy. Thus they must be considered martyrs of the working class movement.

With this understanding, JKM joined the 70 retrenched workers in waging a struggle against the Tatas on this issue. It suggested to the workers that, in order to assert themselves as a force independent from the official union,

they form the Tata Power Project Kamgar Sangharsh Samiti (TPPKSS), consisting of the 70 workers. Importantly, although a court case had already been filed and was continuing in relation to these workers' jobs, JKM suggested that the workers not focus on the litigation, but opt for *direct agitation*.

The Tatas, for their part, issued a statement baldly stating that the company had long settled all its dues to the 70 workers, and it owed them nothing more. It offered to pay the hospital expenses of the widows, as a "humanitarian gesture".

How the struggle was fought

The situation was bleak for the TPPKSS. Their legal case was weak, and they were certain to lose after spending much more time and money. Their force was small, and even out of the 70 some 30 workers were not participating in the struggle for various reasons (some had moved from Mumbai or were working abroad). The Tatas were powerful and could buy anyone — judges, police, media, etc. To defeat them, the workers needed to strengthen their own forces and attack the Tatas' weak points.

Mobilisation

It was decided not only to mobilise the 40-odd workers fully, but also their families — including wives, children and even if possible parents. This greatly swelled the numbers, and gave life to the struggle. Further, the womenfolk actually turned out to be good fighters, often more so than the men. And finally, the participation of the entire family conveyed to the public the importance of the issue.

In order to ensure mobilisation for the programmes (which finally numbered 55), it was decided to institute a weekly "general body meeting", which not only the workers but also family members were asked to attend. The attendance at these GBMs ranged from 20 to 30, ensuring that the decisions were taken with participation of all the active workers, and that the news regarding different programmes was disseminated promptly. Further, it

introduced the concept and practice of democracy in organised life and struggle.

Solidarity

Given the small force, it was vital to get the active support of other workers. The difficulty was that wider solidarity actions with real participation by workers have become very rare in Mumbai — mere token representation is the norm. The TPC struggle, however, had several instances of real and effective solidarity action which boosted the workers' morale and dealt blows to the Tatas. While the nature of the issue was such that all unions supported the demands of the TPPKSS, it was necessary to convert this support into actual mobilisation. The TPPKSS and JKM, including Dalvi's widow and mother, kept on attending meeting after meeting of the Trade Union Joint Action Committee (TUJAC). Such persistence paid off. Several important trade union leaders attended certain programmes of the TPPKSS, including the crucial June 11 programme. Several important unions also sent letters to the TPC criticising the management and supporting the demands of the workers. The TUJAC rally on May Day also passed a resolution in support of the TPC workers' struggle.

At the same time, the TPC workers and JKM activists did not restrict the mobilisation to contacting a few well-known trade union leaders, but directly approached various unit-level union committees with leaflets, booklets, and speeches. When a worker of the closed unit of Goodlass Nerolac committed suicide, TPC workers contacted the Goodlass Nerolac workers, suggested a demonstration on their issue, and participated in it. In the past, JKM had also prominently participated in solidarity efforts for various unions, such as Mukand Iron and Steel and Voltas Switchgears; during the struggle TPPKSS and JKM activists attended the demonstration of the recently formed union of DHL Couriers. The effects of all such small and big efforts were seen in the June 11 demonstration in front of Bombay House, when there were substantial contingents from railways, docks, Voltas Switchgears, Otis Elevators, and representation from others (including DHL Couriers, college teachers, Mukand Iron and Steel, Tata Consulting Engineers, Kamgar Agadi,

Sarva Shramic Sanghatana, AITUC, Lok Raj Sanghatna, IAEU, CITU, youth organisations RADA and Yuva Bharat, and so on). Other organisations that participated in solidarity actions for TPC workers during this entire period included Trade Union Solidarity Committee (TUSC), HMS, BSES (now Reliance Energy) contract workers, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatna (LHS), Goodlass Nerolac workers, Hindustan Lever employees, and, in Panvel, State Transport workers, Nicholas workers and MSEB workers. Several unions collected money through booklets of ten-rupee coupons, each of which asked workers to contribute to keep alive the cause for which Dalvi and Khan died. Of course, it was not solely the efforts of TPPKSS and JKM that brought this about, but also the inspiring, class conscious response of a number of unions and workers. Without the support of all these forces the struggle could never have succeeded. It is a joint victory of Mumbai's working class.

Three special instances

Three special instances must be mentioned. First, the National Railway Mazdoor Union, which embraced the issue as its own. It participated in substantial numbers in three programmes at Bombay House and Flora Fountain. It organised public meetings in support of the TPC workers at several places in Maharashtra, with participation of around 300-500 at each place. It sold hundreds of copies of the booklet brought out by JKM on this event, and also produced a shortened version for wider circulation in its own magazine. And most importantly, it took this issue up as a campaign among all its workers, with gate meetings and a collection drive (as a preparation to organising contract workers of the railways). NRMU used the the ten-rupee coupons to collect around Rs 1.5 lakh from its membership throughout Maharashtra. This money was handed over to the two widows, and a hutment was bought for Amina Khan, who had been evicted from her hutment immediately after her husband's death. Importantly, NRMU pressed other major unions to support this cause and participate in the demonstrations. All this also greatly boosted the morale of the TPC workers.

Secondly, the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, which had mobilised for the programme of Mumbai Resistance in January 2004, expressed the wish to visit the spot of the martyrdom with some hundreds of workers. For this purpose they would have to stay an extra day, which meant making food arrangements for some hundreds of workers. The TPC workers' families were fully mobilised for producing (at home) food packets for hundreds of workers. Although, due to obstruction by the police, the CMM workers were unable to hold a rally at the spot, they could pass near it, and a rally of hundreds was held on the railway platform at VT.

Thirdly, the People's Art and Literary Association (PALA) of Tamil Nadu was inspired by the TPC issue to produce a song-and-dance narration of the entire event, which was staged in Mumbai. It was also staged at the PALA state conference in Tanjavur (Tamil Nadu) in March, at which Akhtar Khan's widow Amina spoke on behalf of the TPC workers, thus reaching the message of this struggle to Tamil Nadu.

Crucially, in all this, JKM and TPPKSS stressed that other workers should support this struggle because *it is also their own*, that is, the same issues of exploitation and retrenchment of contract labour by big industry highlighted by this struggle are central to the whole working class struggle today. And at each meeting speaker after speaker from various unions recognised and projected this fact. Thus the solidarity efforts had the broader political significance of being a struggle (albeit small) of the entire working class, rather than being restricted to mere sympathy with the unfortunate widows. This was no doubt helped by the stand of the widows, that they would not accept any separate settlement with the Tatas, but only as part of an overall settlement.

Exposing the Tatas

The struggle deliberately targeted the Tatas' carefully cultivated public image as "model industrialists" and "humanitarians". Demonstrations were held at the Tatas' head office, Bombay House, which is a very prominent spot in the heart of the city's financial district, a couple of minutes from the Stock

Exchange, RBI, and Flora Fountain (Hutatma Chowk). Never are demonstrations allowed here, but such was the spirit of the demonstrators that the Tatas and the police were helpless to prevent them. On each occasion homage was paid to the two martyrs, and their photos were garlanded. Between October 2003 and June 2004, two rallies (of about 300 workers each) were held at Flora Fountain, two small placard-holding demonstrations between Flora Fountain and Bombay House, and nine full-fledged demonstrations at Bombay House itself (of these, five were held in just five weeks — between May 3 and June 11). One of these included, at a time when police intervention was expected, a special children's rally. In this rally the children of the workers carried special placards, circled the entire block, and ended with a rendition of "*Hum honge kamyaab*". A rally was also held before Bombay House on March 23, the martyrdom day of Bhagat Singh, when apart from the photos of the two TPC martyrs Bhagat Singh's photo was garlanded, and speakers contrasted the path of struggle he charted with that of Gandhi. The last rally before Bombay House, on June 11, was the most significant of all, with 300-400 workers from a wide range of unions and industries, and in the face of a Tata court case asking for an injunction against any demonstration at Bombay House.

The workers exposed how they had been exploited by the Tatas, and then further cheated of even their legal rights. At one demonstration, after the Tatas denied that the workers had completed the years of service that they claimed, each worker carried a placard stating his years of service, and 15 workers spoke describing their years of service, where they had worked, under whom they had worked, and so on.

It was crucial to carry out *widespread* exposure of the Tatas, to hurt their image. First, of course, the workers took their issue directly to the masses, pasting posters in the local trains on three occasions. The workers also held as many as 14 propaganda campaigns at VT and Churchgate railway stations, where lakhs of commuters pass at peak hours. At first these used to consist of merely holding placards and banners, but at a later stage a signature campaign was conducted. Significantly, at the time of collecting signatures, there was no need to explain the issue: all those signing already knew of it,

expressed support for the workers, and many also asked what more they could do (for example, donate money).

The workers also took their case to the media. The Tatas deployed their enormous money power and manpower to squash the negative publicity. For example, a detailed story by a correspondent of a well-known news channel, after being scheduled to be broadcast, was canceled after the Tatas intervened. However, the TPC struggle managed to force the media to cover, to some extent, their demands.

In one case, when a Marathi newspaper printed a piece planted by the Tatas on this issue, the workers went to the newspaper, confronted the chief reporter, insisted that a full reply in the name of the two widows be prominently printed, and said that if it was not they would demonstrate outside the paper. The reply was carried. At another juncture, when the situation was critical, the press was not printing any news of the struggle and the agitators desperately needed to find ways to place pressure on the Tatas, JKM activists approached a prominent playwright to write a play on the entire issue; he agreed, and his decision was given good publicity in one newspaper and a television news channel.

At the time of elections, the press gave publicity to the stand of Dalvi's widow: that her vote would not go to any political party; rather, her vote went to her dead husband, and the struggle he was part of, which was continuing to date.

In the final days of the agitation, a widely-circulated Marathi paper, read particularly among workers and the poor, made the story into its lead article on two occasions — the first, the demonstration before the Chief Minister's bungalow (followed by arrests of the demonstrators) and the second, the negotiation before the labour minister, where the Tatas' attempt to make a separate deal with the widows was rebuffed by them. The banner-headline coverage of the demonstration and arrests had an effect on the state government, and helped to force it to intervene. Meetings with the Chief Minister and labour minister followed.

Pressure on the official union

The agitation also deliberately targeted the office-bearers of the traitor union of TPC.

First, a criminal complaint was filed against Secretary Kailash Shinde for abetment to suicide, and mass pressure was brought on the police station, resulting in his arrest and detention, albeit for a very short time.

Secondly, 12 demonstrations were held at various TPC plants and receiving stations, appealing to the permanent TPC workers to support the retrenched workers' cause.

Thirdly, and most importantly, repeated-mass visits (seven in all) were made to the houses of the office-bearers of the traitor union, mainly by the workers' wives and children (though on occasion with a handful of workers as well). There the women, particularly the mother and the wife of Dalvi, berated and shamed the office-bearers, and threatened them that if their question were not resolved the consequences would be dire. This was a severe embarrassment for these persons, and people all around came to know of what had happened. As a result of all these efforts, the official (traitor) union of TPC put pressure on the management to negotiate with the retrenched workers and settle the issue.

Under the repressive Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act, managements do not have to take cognisance of any union other than the officially recognised union. Yet the Tatas, who had earlier rejected any claim by these workers, were now compelled to negotiate with the TPPKSS, and the official union was also compelled to agree to the negotiation. In fact, on October 3, 2003, the management and the official union were to have signed an agreement on the union's charter of demands. However, first the self-immolation incident, and then the workers' struggle, delayed the signing by eight and a half months!

Final Mobilisations

From the start the demand of the struggle was that all the workers be absorbed as permanent workers by TPC, and that the widows too be given permanent jobs, apart from compensation. For five months of the agitation and negotiations, workers persisted with this demand, hoping to force the Tatas to absorb at least some of the workers. However, it became evident that this demand could not be achieved in the present balance of forces — that is, a much larger movement than presently possible would be required. The workers then negotiated on the amount of compensation to be paid to them in lieu of jobs.

Final Mobilisations

The struggle took many twists and turns. At various junctures it seemed that it would finally be defeated, and the workers would receive only a small amount or nothing at all. However, at each juncture, it was through fresh ideas of mobilisation and mass action that the setbacks were overcome. The last setback came after the signing of a written agreement with Tatas on April 28, 2004. According to the agreement, the Tatas would pay compensation according to the years of service of each worker. However, the Tatas interpreted this in a way whereby, while the widows would have received Rs 7.5 lakh each, the workers would have got a total of only Rs 1.45 crore in compensation, whereas the workers claimed it should be Rs 2.15 crore. The difficulty was that the drafting of the agreement was poor and left room for the Tatas' interpretation. At the same time the Tatas moved the High Court for an injunction against any demonstration outside Bombay House. It seemed that there was no way out, and the workers would have to accept the Tatas' interpretation.

It was decided to make one last effort, contacting union committees directly for a mobilisation at Bombay House, before any such injunction was granted. The June 11 rally was the most impressive of all, not only in numbers (300 to 400) but in spirit. Well-known TUJAC leaders too joined the protest and made speeches there. The children once more took out a procession and sang. The entire occasion left a great impact on the participants and public, and sent a message to the Tatas could not ignore. Still the matter remained suspended, with no resolution.

The final step was dramatic: on June 18 the workers and their families demonstrated outside the Chief Minister's bungalow, and were arrested and detained for the whole day (messages came from other police stations where earlier demonstrations had taken place, stating that if these people are released, they will simply go back and demonstrate again). As mentioned earlier, this arrest was given much publicity by a very widely-circulated Marathi paper.

The state government is now suddenly sensitive to negative publicity relating to all issues of workers and peasants in the run-up to assembly elections, so in a few days the Chief Minister's staff contacted the workers and gave them an appointment with him. After their meeting with him, a meeting was fixed with the labour minister. In that meeting before the minister, the TPC top management, including the managing director, were present. They directly negotiated for some hours with JKM and the TPPKSS, and a compromise figure of Rs 1.85 crore was arrived at. Along with the payment to the two widows, the figure comes to Rs 2 crore.

While the economic gains of the struggle are impressive, what is more significant from the point of view of working class politics is that the TPC struggle has shown that it is possible to struggle even in the most adverse of conditions — a handful of contract workers already out of work, and with a weak legal case against a giant industrial house. It has shown once again that, instead of relying on litigation, workers should rely on mass agitation. It has shown the crucial role that can be played by mobilising wide solidarity. It has shown the importance of much and varied preparation for sustaining a long-drawn, militant struggle. And while it was only at the end of the struggle that a demonstration was held against the government, it gave a glimpse of the importance of targeting the State as part of any workers' struggle.

July 25, 2004.



Children's rally around Bombay House : The children of struggling TPC workers carried placards giving details of their fathers' service, questioning the TATA management's decision to retrench them. Children circled the entire building and ended with a rendition of "Hum hong kamyab".



TPC workers demonstrating on the International Working Women's Day on 8th March, 2004 at the gate of Trombay Power Generating Station.



Solidarity Programme by Trade Unions on 11th June, 2004 in front of Bombay House.