

ISSUE ONE • AUGUST 2020

# TECH PEOPLE

# RESIST!

**RESIGNATION AT  
GUNPOINT**  
WHATS HAPPENING  
AT COGNIZANT AND  
HOW TO RESIST IT

**CONFRONT  
ATTACKS ON  
WORKERS'  
RIGHTS**

**MEMBER  
SPEAK**  
WHY I JOINED  
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**CASE  
UPDATE**  
AIITEU SAVES  
300 JOBS IN  
KOLKATA





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## ON THE DEMISE OF SHYAMAL CHAKRABORTY, VICE PRESIDENT, AIITEU

Former President of CITU, West Bengal Committee and national leader of trade union movement of the country and founding Vice President of AIITEU, Comrade Shyamal Chakraborty passed away yesterday 6th August, 2020 at 1.50 PM in a hospital in Kolkata.

He was one of the first comrades to identify the exploitation in IT & ITeS sector and thereby was the leading founding member of AIITEU.

AIITEU community hereby pays homage to the departed leader and offers heartfelt condolences to his daughter Prof. Ushashi Chakraborty and his family members. We resolve to complete his incomplete task and translate his discreet thoughts for the working class movement.



# 01

# CONFRONT ATTACKS ON WORKERS' RIGHTS

BY K. HEMALATA  
PRESIDENT, CITU

The Covid-19 pandemic and the lock-down imposed in many countries to contain the virus is a learning experience for the workers and employees in our country. It is an occasion which makes workers look at the employers and the government, and understand the character of the prevalent capitalist system. It enables them to draw lessons about the way forward through their own life experiences.

The sudden announcement of the countrywide lock-down by Prime Minister Modi, with just 4 hours' notice created havoc in the lives of crores of workers and toiling people.

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimated that 14 crores jobs were lost during the lock-down period. Of course, some jobs have come back after the "unlock-down" has started in phases. But even today the unemployment rate, which was already the highest in 45 years before Covid-19, continues to be high. Even today, thousands of employees including IT employees are being retrenched by IT companies, including big multinational companies like TCS, Infosys, Cognizant, etc.

## **WORKERS PAID THE PRICE OF THE LOCK-DOWN**

The lock-down was expected to be utilised to strengthen health infrastructure. But instead of creating a scientific understanding of the corona-virus, the BJP government and the ruling party sought to spread unscientific myths in tackling the health crisis. Even today, pujas and hawans are being held in many places to please 'Corona Mai'.

The first case of Covid-19 was detected in the end of January 2020. But the BJP government at the centre took a long time to respond. The lock-down was announced only after the Prime Minister's 'Namaste Trump' in Ahmedabad, and the planned toppling of Madhya Pradesh government were over. Lakhs of people were mobilised for these events.

Following the demand of the trade union movement, the BJP government issued a directive that workers should not be retrenched during lock-down; their salaries should not be withheld; those who were on leave but could not come back due to lock-down should be treated as being on duty.

Workers should not be evacuated from their houses during the lock-down period. But nothing was done to ensure their implementation at the ground level.

Instead, when this order was challenged in the Supreme Court, the government silently withdrew the order even before the Supreme Court started hearing it.

Jobless, hungry and shelter-less, lakhs of migrant workers wanted to go to their native places. But the BJP government did not make any arrangement for their safe transport. Only after a lot of pressure from the people, it arranged special trains. Even then the workers were forced to pay for their tickets.

Several state governments treated the migrant workers walking on the roads as criminals, booked cases against them, talked of putting them in jails, sprayed disinfectants over them, etc.

Some state governments, as in Karnataka cancelled the trains as demanded by the employers, who wanted the workers ready whenever they planned to open their establishments.

**“ Even today, thousands of employees including IT employees are being retrenched by IT companies, including big multinational companies like TCS, Infosys, Cognizant, etc.**

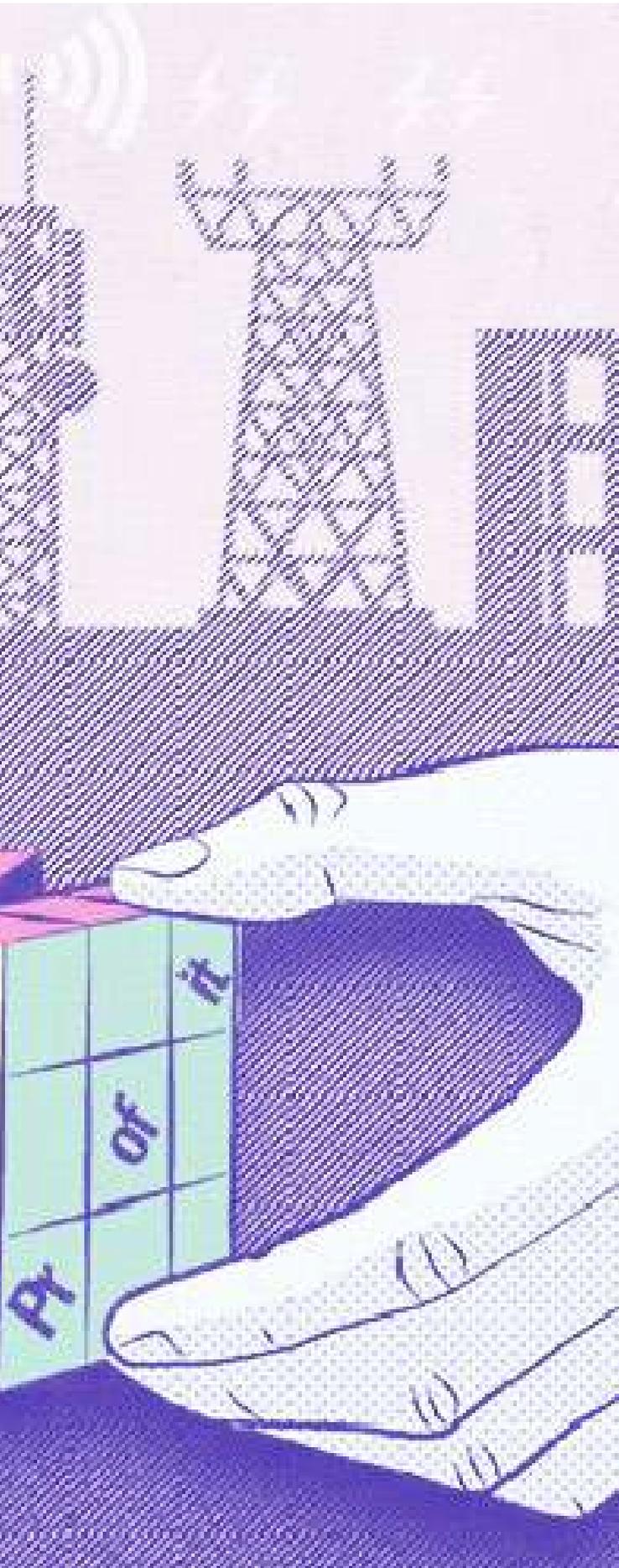
# NEOLIBERAL AGENDA PUSHED DURING THE PANDEMIC

The other, even more appalling aspect is its project of choosing the lock-down period to fast-track its neoliberal agenda of anti-worker labour law amendments, privatisation of the entire public sector and handing over the country's natural resources to the private sector, both domestic and foreign. The Labour Secretary wrote to all state governments directing them to consider increasing working hours to 12 a day, to increase the threshold number for retrenchment and closure etc, under the Industrial Disputes Act to 300 from the present 100 etc. Several state governments went a step further to exempt employers from implementation of most labour laws.

The BJP state government in Uttar Pradesh exempted 38 state labour laws, almost all, for 3 years; the Madhya Pradesh government exempted them for 1000 days; the Gujarat government for 1200 days. The Haryana government announced exemption from labour laws for newly recruited workers. 13 state governments in the country increased working hours from 8 to 12. The threshold level for retrenchment and closure has been increased to 300 in several states.

The Rs. 20 lakh crore 'package' announced by the Prime Minister and detailed out by the Finance Minister through lengthy speeches spanning over five days contained nothing for the workers and almost nothing for small enterprises.





It was not aimed at putting some money in the pockets of the people so that their purchasing power would be increased, demand would be increased and the economy would be stimulated. Instead it was aimed at providing cheap loans and promises of guarantees to corporations.

The Finance Minister announced that only 1-4 public enterprises would be allowed in strategic sectors, to be decided by the government. All others would be disinvested, privatised or sold off. The government has already started the process of privatisation of railways.

The Prime Minister himself inaugurated the bidding for commercial extraction of coal from our coal mines. Ordinances have been issued dismantling the Agricultural Produce Marketing Societies. Minimum Support Price and government procurement will become diluted and the public distribution system would be dismantled. Peasant farming, predominant in our country, will be converted to corporate farming. Our poor peasants will be left at the mercy of big food processing and agricultural products marketing monopolies.

The government has resorted to the most dubious means of naming this entire package as 'Atmanirbhar (self-reliance) Abhiyan' totally concealing the subservient character of these measures. The entire project is meant to destroy whatever self-reliance we have achieved after independence; destroy our indigenous manufacturing capacities and make our country dependent on foreign monopolies including for our defence requirements.

# THE PATH TO RESISTANCE

To suppress all voices of resistance and opposition, the BJP government is also resorting to autocratic measures. Anybody opposing its policies is being targeted and arrested. It is using the State machinery, the CBI, the Enforcement Directorate, the National Investigation Agency, etc to threaten and intimidate them. Dalit rights activists, human rights activists, social activists who were active in the anti-CAA and anti-NPR protests – are being labelled ‘anti national’, ‘urban naxals’, charged with sedition and put into prison.

These disastrous policies must be resisted and changed to save our country and our people from being pushed into conditions prevalent during the exploitative and oppressive British rule. It needs to be understood that all these are part of neoliberalism, an integral part of the capitalist system. Neoliberalism, which was brought forward by the capitalist class as a solution to the capitalist crisis of the 1970s, has proved to be a failure. It now stands discredited across the world. But the Modi government is adamant in implementing it.

While resisting these anti-worker and anti-national measures, the working class and the broader sections of the people, the progressive sections of society need to understand the inability of the capitalist system to meet the basic needs of common people and the need for an alternative system devoid of exploitation. They should be helped, through their own experience, to understand the real reasons behind the present issues like job losses, unemployment, wage cuts, attacks on their hard won rights etc., the link between these issues and government policies and the reality that it is the big corporates, the capitalist class that direct these policies. While being elected by the common people, the governments at the centre have been working to benefit these classes.

Overcoming these issues and achieving the genuine demands of workers and employees and other toiling sections require a change of the existing system. The most developed capitalist country in the world, the USA, is the most affected by Covid-19, with the largest number of infections and deaths. It has no significant public health system. At the same time, socialist countries which have strong public health systems and universal health care, have been able to contain the virus effectively with low infections and very few mortalities. The struggle for change to such a system requires unity of the entire working people, workers, employees, peasants, agricultural workers, artisans etc. and a conscious and determined effort.



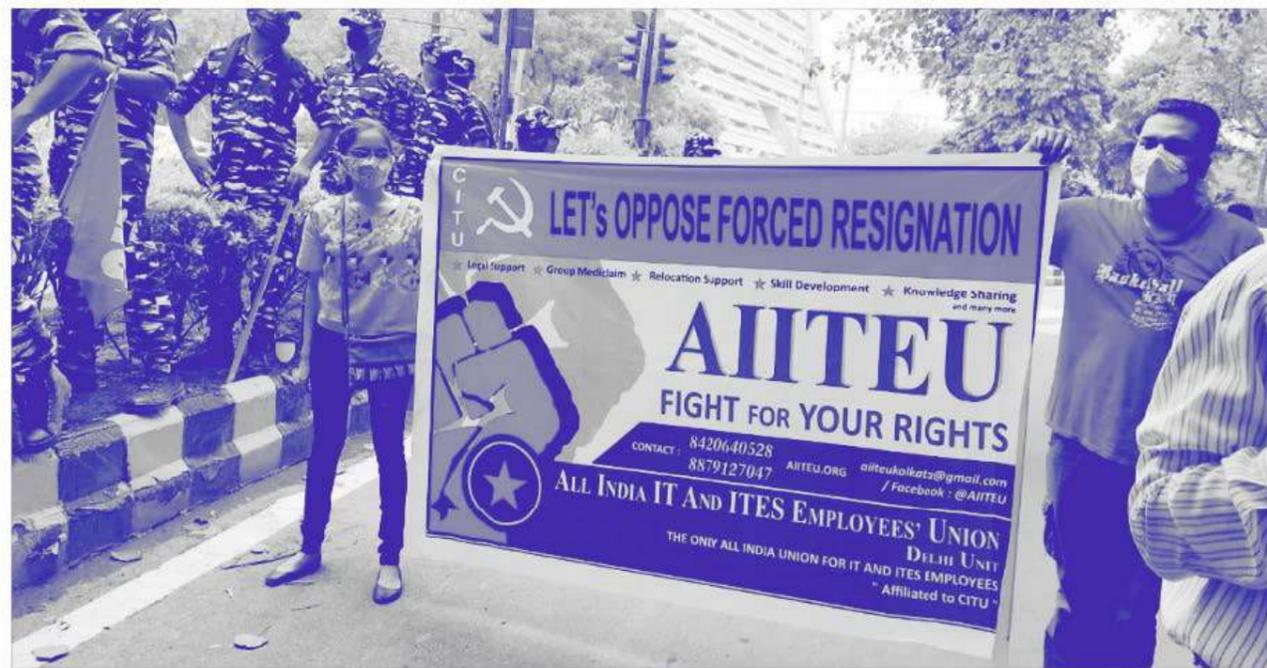
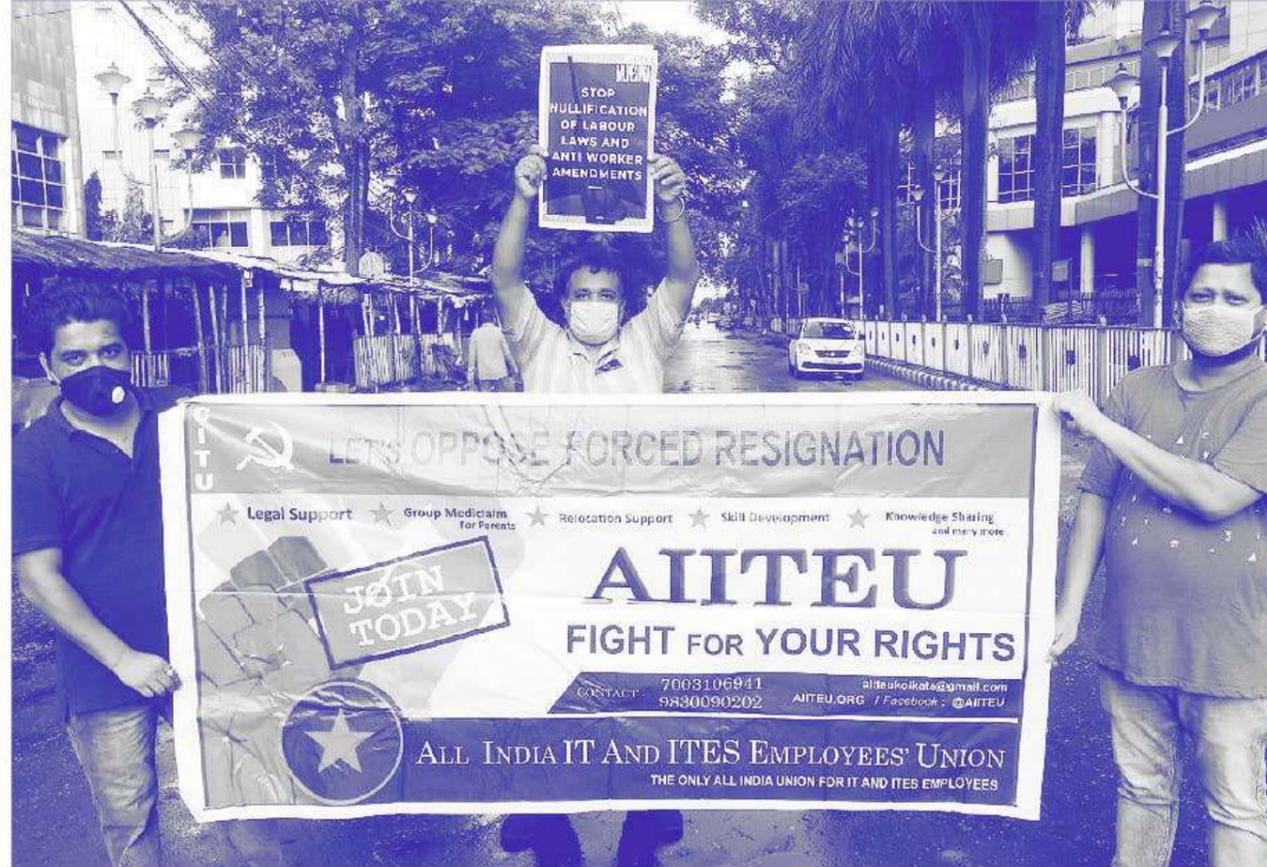
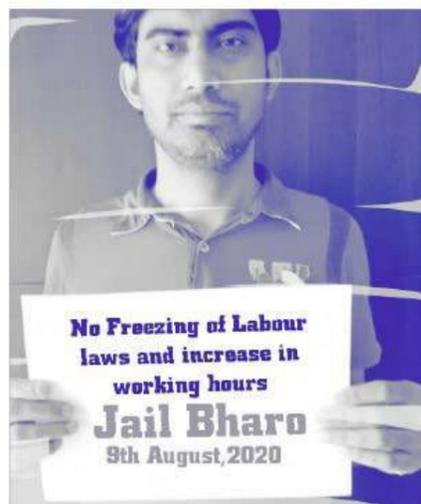
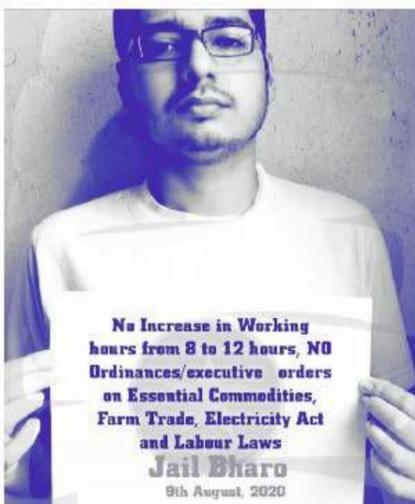
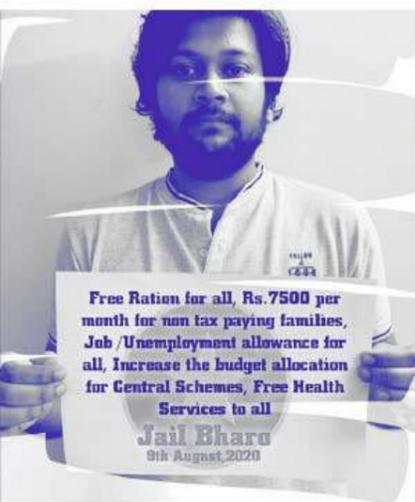
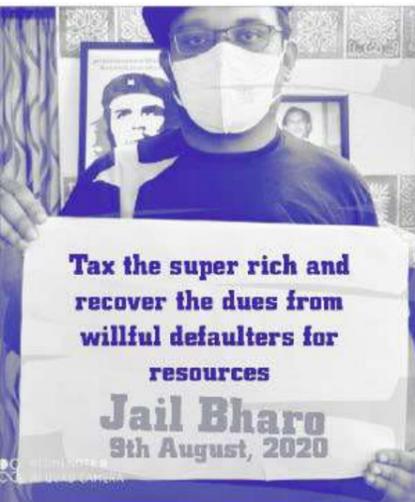
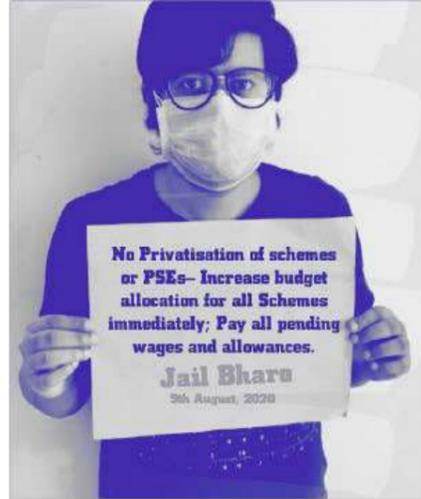
***These disastrous policies must be resisted and changed to save our country and our people from being pushed into conditions prevalent during the exploitative and oppressive British rule.***

## THE OPPRESSED MASSES REFUSE TO SELL THE COUNTRY

It is a welcome development that the broad trade union movement and the united peasant movement have synchronised their calls for satyagraha/jail bhara etc. across the country on 9th August 2020. The trade union movement has given the call of 'Save India' with the slogan that the working class would not allow the country to be sold. The peasant movement has extended its solidarity and support to this call. At the same time both the movements have raised issues of immediate cash transfer, free distribution of food grains, work under MGNREGA and its extension to the urban areas etc. among other demands specific to their classes.

The resistance and defiance struggle on 9th August, the historic day when the call to 'Quit India' was given against British rule, should be taken to further heights, with the objective of changing the pro-corporate policies of the ruling class to pro-worker and pro-people policies. This is the immediate task before the working class people, workers, employees, peasants, agricultural workers, artisans etc. and a conscious and determined effort.





## AIITEU PARTICIPATES IN SAVE INDIA DAY, 9 AUGUST

On 9th August, the day famous for the launch of the Quit India movement against a colonial power, the masses in India launched another campaign – Save India Day – to fight against a similarly oppressive government. Trade unions, farmers’ and agricultural workers’ organisations, student, youth and women’s organisations all participated in this protest through a joint platform. Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers were a significant part of this protest.

The protest was against the privatisation of public wealth, anti-worker policies, and the government’s attempts to divide the people through communal politics.

AIITEU participated in this protest in three cities alongside the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). In Kolkata, we demonstrated against layoffs, wage cuts and privatisation. We stood in solidarity with other workers’ demands. In Hyderabad, we demonstrated with placards at home using social media due to Covid-19 protocols. In Delhi, we participated in the huge demonstration at Jantar Mantar with other organisations.

IT employees and workers are starting to come together to resist exploitation. AIITEU will continue to represent IT employees’ and workers’ demands in all movements, and will continue to support progressive movements for workers’ rights in all sectors.

02



# WHITE COLLAR CHRONICLES

#SAVE LABOUR RIGHTS FOR RAJIV SIKDAR

IT EMPLOYEE CYCLED  
300KM TO SURVIVE

IT EMPLOYEE LOSES JOB IN KOLKATA  
DURING LOCKDOWN  
RECEIVES NO COMPENSATION FROM THE  
COMPANY MANAGEMENT  
PERSECUTED BY THE GOVERNMENT FOR  
CYCLING TO PURULIA DURING  
THE LOCKDOWN

**A 25 year old man, Rajiv Sikdar reaches Kolkata to pursue his dreams in Information Technology. He is from a remote village in Purulia district, West Bengal. Rajiv, who is from a farming family, started working in a company called Fusion in Sector 5, Salt Lake, West Bengal. The moment his dreams were ready to take off, Covid-19 broke out in the country and changed everything. With the declaration of the lock-down around the country, the company management decided to go for a mass retrenchment ignoring the advisory of the government labour office.**

Some of Rajiv's colleagues got sacked but he somehow survived the job cuts. He could not reach office from 23rd march till 2nd May due to the lack of any private or government transport. Company authorities too didn't provide any transport or help him to avail 'work from home' facilities. He tried surviving on his small savings and waited for the lock-down to be called off. Alas! The lock-down got extended even further. On 3rd May, when all his savings were over he called his office authorities to ask for his salary, but company management refused any pay. They cited a 'no work no money' policy directly ignoring the 2005 Epidemic Act in India.

Rajiv, who was staying in a rented apartment was constantly getting eviction threats from his home owner. With almost no support and financially cornered in every way in the City of Joy, Rajiv did the unexpected. He borrowed some money from his local friends, rented a cycle and decided to ride back to his home from Kolkata to Purulia with all his luggage. With almost no food, no transport, and no proper place to rest, he cycled 310km in 3 days until he was stopped by some local police authorities. Instead of being compassionate towards this young man with shattered dreams, the state authorities charged him for breaking Covid-19 lock-down norms.

In spite of everything the young man didn't give up. He decided to stand up for his rights. He contacted the All India IT and ITeS Employees' Union and decided to fight against all atrocities against him and his colleagues.

# 03

## CASE UPDATES TELEPERFORMANCE

### **AIITEU SAVES 300 JOBS IN KOLKATA**

On 10th April 2020, Teleperformance Global Services Pvt Ltd served a notice of termination to more than 300 employees from its Sector V, Kolkata office.

CITU affiliated IT union, All India IT and ITeS Employees' Union (AIITEU), had condemned the mass retrenchment by Teleperformance Global Services Pvt Ltd, Kolkata office and demanded immediate intervention from the labour department of State and Central Government.

AIITEU sent letters to the Labour Commissioner, Government of West Bengal and to the Secretary to the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, demanding a strict action against the company for the violation of instructions under Disaster Management Act 2005. AIITEU also demanded immediate intervention of the respective authorities so that these IT majors can be restrained from unfair labour practices amidst the worst ever national health crisis.

Finally on 20th April, Teleperformance Global Services Pvt Ltd was compelled to withdraw all termination notices sent to its employees.



Stellar Performance

@TELE  PERFORMANCE



300 Pink Slips withdrawn after  
**AIITEU rises to the occasion in support of**  
Teleperformance Employees

The company informed the employees that the notice of separation was withdrawn. AIITEU is truly thankful to all the concerned authorities of the State and Central Governments for such a quick response.

AIITEU also thanks Teleperformance Global Services Pvt. Ltd. for reconsidering their decision in favour of their employees and requests again to withdraw all termination notices sent to its employees working in Gurugram and Mohali offices.

# 04 THE DEBATE ON PRIVATISATION

## CASE STUDY ON LIFE INSURANCE CORPORATION

BY AITEU RESEARCH TEAM  
ON SOCIAL ISSUES

### BRIEF HISTORY OF LIFE INSURANCE IN INDIA

The first insurance company in India ever recorded was Oriental Life Assurance Company. It was established in Calcutta in 1818.

It initially covered life security benefits of Europeans (the ruling class at the time) only. Although later privileged Indian citizens were included, the monthly installment rate for Indian citizens was much higher than that of the British Indian citizens. As a result, it was not possible for the working class under colonial rule to afford life insurance.

Later in 1870, the first Indian venture in the Insurance sector, "Bombay Mutual Life Assurance" started its business and provided life coverage without racial discrimination.

In 1906, Surendranath Tagore from Jorasanko Tagore House started an insurance company. But the insurance installment rates for both companies was too high for the Indian working class to afford.

In 1912, the Life Insurance Act and the Provident Fund Act were passed in British-occupied India. But even then, in terms of premiums and coverage, private life insurance companies were guided by unwritten policies of ethnic inequality and racial discrimination.

Post independence, in 1955 Feroze Gandhi first raised the issue in the Parliament of embezzlement by the faulty stock of a private insurance company. This is the first ever recorded financial corruption in independent India. The villain of this fame was a business magnate from Calcutta, Mr. Ramakrishna Dalmia. At that time, the scam summed up to around Rs 1.2 crore. Later Ramakrishna Dalmiya was sentenced to 2 years imprisonment. Of course, he spent all his time in the hospital on the pretext of being physically ill.

## **PUBLIC VS PRIVATE SECTOR**

The main goal of a private company is profit, whereas the main goal of a government company is public service.

The bulk of the profits of a private company are confined to the governing body or management authorities of the company, whereas the profits of a state-owned company can be reused by the state for the benefit of the state and the public interest.

It is often said that privatisation creates a corruption-free system or service and is capable of providing improved services at a lower cost due to competition among many private institutional partners in the market. If this were true, then private health or education would have brought a revolutionary change in India. In fact, just the opposite has happened.

The privatisation of education and health has made these services unaffordable, resulting in a large number of financially backward people and socially deprived groups in India failing to avail these basic rights of citizenship. A private sector company always tends to increase profits, hence it always needs a larger market base. To pump up the insurance market, artificial social uncertainties, insecurities or problems can be introduced to our nation through mass propaganda sponsored by private companies.

Historically capitalism has always had a certain type of development. Although capitalism first highlights the lucrative aspects of a competitive market, the main purpose of these capitalist organizations is to increase personal profits by establishing a monopoly by abusing the political power of the state through influence and corruption. A good example of such a scenario is available in the telecom sector market where the government itself is promoting a privately owned network connection service.

## **PRIVATISING PROFITS & SOCIALISING LOSSES**

The Central Government of India has emphasized on the decentralisation of Indian government agencies as a corrective measure to stem the decline of the Indian economy following demonetisation.

Profitable public companies like ONGC, Bharat Petroleum are also going into private hands, while government financial institutions like LIC, SBI are being pushed forward to make up for the losses incurred due to financial corruption in IDBI or YES Bank, resulting in a drop in interest percentage for public users. This process of privatisation of profit and constantly socialising the loss and risks will soon lead to a crisis among the middle and lower middle classes, resulting in a complete rupture of the Indian economic distribution model.

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The decision of allowing FDI in LIC will act as a catalyst in bringing back the ghost of inequality and financial corruption in India among the working class. It should be kept in mind that the financial budget of the country, which has been created for 130 crore people this year, is less than the total capital of 70 privileged families. With such levels of inequality existing in our nation already, FDI in LIC will only result in another cause of insecurity for the common masses.

Therefore, such a decision must be condemned and immediately stopped through constant, organised and united protests by the working class for the working class.



# 05 BLOODBATH IN THE IT SECTOR

**“CTS, TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION HAVE STARTED THEIR RETRENCHMENT PROGRAM MERCILESSLY WITH A TARGET OF RETRENCHING 18,000 PEOPLE WITHIN THE NEXT TWO MONTHS.”**

**“FUSION HAS SACKED EMPLOYEES IN THE HUNDREDS.”**

**“TELEPERFORMANCE & WIPRO JOINED THE PARADE OF LAYOFFS IN KOLKATA, MUMBAI AND OTHER PARTS OF NORTH INDIA.”**



## 3RD JULY PROTEST, IT SECTOR, KOLKATA

As Covid-19 rages across our country, a huge number of retrenchments are occurring in the ‘Silicon Valleys’ of India.

Although according to the initial advisory of the government, retrenchments or wage cuts were not advisable under the 2005 Epidemic Act, later the Union Government revoked its advisory, letting corporate houses officially slaughter their employees like animals through retrenchments.

All India IT & ITes Employees’ Union (AIITEU) organised a peaceful protest in Kolkata condemning this inhuman retrenchment. The protest was carried out while adhering to social distancing.

Also, cases have been launched in court to protect the interest of the employees who have been mercilessly let go by IT firms.



**06**

## **RESIGNATION AT GUNPOINT**

### **WHAT'S HAPPENING AT COGNIZANT AND HOW TO RESIST IT**

**BY SAUBHIK  
BHATTACHARYA  
GENERAL SECRETARY,  
AIITEU**

In an unexpectedly pro-labour move, on 29th March, the Government of India had come out with a directive discouraging layoffs. But then, more true to character, the government itself withdrew this directive.

This was followed by a large number of retrenchments in different sectors. The worst victims are probably people in the IT and ITeS sectors. Without taking a firm stand on its own direction on 'No Wage Cut and No Termination' and without prioritising its implementation all over the country, the government of India was busy finding an escape route. And so most MNCs have started to terminate their employees desperately. From TCS, Infosys, Wipro, HCL and Tech Mahindra more than 10,000 employees had to resign after the lock-down. But the way Cognizant is decreasing their employee strength is something unprecedented.

Cognizant Technology Solutions (CTS or Cognizant) has been constantly forcing its employees to resign. According to the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947, if a company has more than 100 employees, it must obtain an approval from the Labour Department in order to execute a retrenchment. This is why Cognizant is forcing its employees to resign instead of retrenching them.

Rebranding the termination in the name of voluntary resignation by employees is also illegal. Several employees from Cognizant Kolkata, Bengaluru, Chennai and Hyderabad are facing the same mental harassment from the management. Terminations are being done secretly, by verbally asking employees to put down their papers. After which, employees are being released within a week with approximately 4-5 months' worth of salary as a severance package.

Under their 'Fit For Growth' plan, Cognizant has already reduced their employee strength by more than 9,000. In this situation, we foresee another 5,000 people in Cognizant losing their jobs in the next 1-2 months. Although the Covid-19 outbreak may have impacted Cognizant's Travel & Hospitality and Retail business, which forms only 8-9% of its revenue, it still has to be kept in mind also that their revenue has increased by \$10 billion in last 10 years. Instead of standing with employees in these tough times, the way Cognizant has been terminating them and rebranding this as self-resignation is very alarming to the people working in the IT and ITeS sector.

Obviously, we do not expect that a company suffering from continuous losses or a relative lack of projects should never conduct layoffs. But this is not the situation that Cognizant is in today. Does the "Fit For Growth" plan really fit in the current crisis? If more than 9000 people have voluntarily resigned, why did they do this without having another job? Before the pandemic, the unemployment rate in the country was the highest in the last 45 years and it has now increased to 27%. The IT and ITeS sector is equally hit. This means that workers from this sector are aware of the dwindling number of jobs. We know that it will be hard to find employment in next 8 to 10 months. Why would IT employees then indulge in mass resignations?

## **"IF YOU DON'T WANT TO JEOPARDISE YOUR FUTURE..."**

The answers lie in the communication between HR managers and employees. The Cognizant management has been sending employees that have low performance ratings to a Performance Improvement Programme (PIP). So far, so good. But whether the employee successfully completes this programme or not, the end result is always shown as negative. The management then immediately sends employees a show cause notice. The funniest part is that Cognizant has also been sending show cause notices to employees who are not currently working on any projects, asking them why they are not getting any projects. Instead of admitting their inability to provide a project, the management is blaming benched employees for not getting projects. Surprisingly, they have not spared employees who have good ratings or are still working on some projects. Recorded conversations show how HR managers have been insisting to the employee that he or she must resign, despite reasonable justifications by the employee.

*"If you feel that this order of dismissal can jeopardise your future career prospects, you have an option to submit a resignation voluntarily within 7 days of the receipt of this communication. The same shall be favorably considered, this order of dismissal shall be rescinded and you shall be treated as having resigned from the service of the company."*

*"Know before any outcome is communicated from the hearing officer, Cognizant can also provide you a win-win solution, where we can offer you a severance pay and in case if you choose to access that severance pay, we will ensure that your exit from Cognizant is smooth along with all the documents, you know, issued to you in time."*

Actual quotes from Cognizant HR representatives:

## **WHAT COGNIZANT OWES ITS EMPLOYEES**

There are thousands of examples like these. To reduce the number of terminations, Cognizant is creating fear and uncertainty about employees' future, and employees are being forced to put in their papers. This is not how employees should be treated. In the last 10 years, Cognizant's annual revenue has increased to approximately USD 16.7 billion from USD 4.6 billion. This revenue has been accumulated only from the huge extra unpaid work hours extorted from all employees and from the collective effort of these employees. Instead of throwing out its employees in this crisis, the management should share half the profit they made in the last 5 years to save their actual assets - employees.

But Cognizant has sensed the indifference of the government to the working class. Labour Departments have ignored repeated complaints from IT unions. If the government can't compel these employers to pay their employees, they should pay back double the deducted tax from their income and cover these employees of the knowledge-based industry with social security. The employer should bear the cost of this. This is not very different from budget provisions for the corporations that we see every year.

Somehow the government has succeeded in making us believe that it has no responsibility towards unemployed citizens or towards common people. They have no responsibility to ensure the right to livelihood and the right to live with human dignity of citizens, as if Article 21 of the Constitution of India does not exist at all. Workers from the IT and ITeS sector must raise their voices against these malpractices and against gross violation of labour laws. Management should be dragged to court against harassment of their employees. It is not about winning or losing. It is about taking a stand against ill-treatment and showing employers that the game is not one sided..

**" In the last 10 years, Cognizant's annual revenue has increased to approximately USD 16.7 billion from USD 4.6 billion. This revenue has been accumulated only from the huge extra unpaid work hours extorted from all employees and from the collective effort of these employees. "**

08

# MEMBER SPEAK

## WHY I JOINED THE UNION

## A.K.A HOW ALMOST LOSING AN EYE TURNED ME TO UNION ORGANISING

## BY AIITEU MEMBER\*

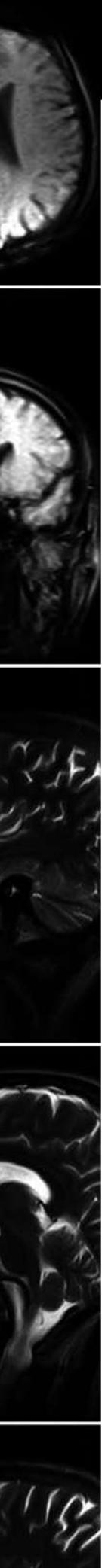
**\*We don't disclose members names (unless specified to do so) to maintain confidentiality. Members can chose what details they want to divulge based on their discretion.**

I was on a train about to reach Jaipur station when I started seeing dark grey spots through my right eye. When I shut my left eye to assess the situation, and moved my head I could see my sleeping teammate sitting next to me, parts of his face masked with transparent grey spots. "Akshay" I called out. "Theres something wrong with my eye."

We reached the station and were greeted by blinding white afternoon sunlight. I kept winking and shutting my left eye to figure out what was happening. "You were working on the presentation all night. It's just fatigue from the screen." Akshay tried to offer an explanation.

Our train was late. We had to rush to our meeting. This was 25th May 2018 - a Thursday. We were working on a project to improve the call centre experience for an Adolescent Counselling Helpline in Rajasthan. My office was in Delhi, we were doing field research with youth groups on sexual and reproductive health issues with an NGO partner in Dholpur, Rajasthan and we would make one-day trips to Jaipur to meet with the helpline providers to update them on our learnings.

This particular meeting was an important one. I hadn't slept in two nights, barring the short nap on the train. The funders (client), call centre leadership and the tele-counsellors would all be present. It was a half day workshop, where Akshay and I were to share our research findings, and then all of us were to brainstorm on ideas to make the helpline more impactful. I knew something was terribly wrong, but I put on my 'game face' and got into the cab.



We met in a conference room at the call centre. Lights had been dimmed for the presentation. I could not see anything from the right eye. By the time the meeting ended in the evening and we got out, the tiny grey spots had increased in size. The vision in the right eye had reduced by 50 percent, at the centre of which was a giant grey semi-transparent spot. I started googling frantically after we boarded our train to Delhi. "I am sure its nothing. Take an off tomorrow and get it checked." Akshay tried to calm the silent nervousness he sensed. "What if I go blind in one eye? Are there jobs that one can do only with one eye?" I joked half seriously.

By the time I went to the eye doctor the next day, I could barely see anything from the right eye. I had to get a friend to accompany me because my peripheral vision was affected and I couldn't cross the road. It was difficult to describe what was happening to me. "Imagine if someone put a ninety percent dark grey screen on one of your eyes" I told the doctor.

I was 31 at the time. I never had any serious health issues except for a tonsillectomy to help with a chronic inflammation. But I knew I wasn't living a healthy life. I would work all night very often. I didn't sleep well. I never ate properly or on time. I had terrible mechanisms to cope with stress and anxiety. I blamed myself even though I did not know the cause. The eye doctor didn't say much. He asked me to get an MRI and CT scan along with some usual tests. He also told me to consult a neurologist.

The initial prognosis was Optic Neuritis - an inflammation of the optic nerve - but the cause was unclear. So I had to do follow up tests and referrals. In the middle of this I also went to work. I was not compelled by my superiors. Quite the contrary. Nor was it bravado. Perhaps, I didn't want to be alone while I waited for the results. So I put a cotton ball on my eye, patched it with medical tape and squinted at my laptop in the office. Somewhere in the day I would follow up with the labs or doctors.

It was a Thursday when I met with a second neurologist with my father who had come to Delhi at my behest. "Get admitted right away." The Doctor ordered. "If we keep trying to find the cause, you will go blind. It might already be too late." This was the first time it really hit me. Why didn't the first neuro suggest this? Did I not ask the right questions? Why did I go to work instead of focusing on this? In this internal monologue happening in parallel as we were discussing the treatment plan, I blamed myself again.

After my admission, I was pumped with steroids for three days. By the second day, the vision in my right eye started coming back. They did more tests to pinpoint the root cause. A spinal tap revealed that my cerebrospinal fluid (the liquid around the brain and spine) pressure was abnormally high. Why? They couldn't figure out.

Idiopathic inter-cranial hypertension causing Optic Neuritis, said the medical report. A disease is called [idiopathic](#) if the cause of apparent spontaneous origin is unknown. I didn't internalise it at the time, but it didn't take me long to realise that the 'unknown' disease is Neoliberalism.

The place I worked at could be termed extremely progressive and modern. It was a small sized and tight knit design studio, that did user-centered research and design in different domains, including digital services and technology platforms. Here, the bosses were your friends. Mental health was considered an important issue. Senior employees could take paid sabbaticals if they felt ['burnt out'](#).

Employees were asked to consider the organisation as their own. One was encouraged to voice their concerns to the bosses. We were not just expected to do project work, but organise learning sessions, inculcate hobbies at the workplace, host get togethers and improve the organisational culture and administration as well. There was a values manifesto that emphasized that culture and 'play' was as important as work. If work felt like play, then it was ideal. Everyone truly believed that.

I believed that.

When I started working at the organisation, let's call it BurnoutStudio, as a 22 year old right out of college I thought it was utopian. When I lost my eyesight, I had already completed 10 years there. I haven't told this to anyone but I had wanted to quit every year, but a part of me couldn't shake the 'work is family' indoctrination. I truly believed that one could work from within and ensure that as employees we got fairer compensation, better governance and be able to voice ethical concerns on projects. I was due to leave the organisation when the project I had gone to Jaipur for ended. I'd like to think my body decided to expedite my exit by going on strike.

For us as employees, the expectation was set really high. Both in terms of what BurnoutStudio expected from us, and what we could expect from it. It was in the latter where the cracks started unravelling. This blurring of the personal and professional, doesn't change the fact that an employee is, at the end of the day, selling their time and skills for money. The neoliberal workplace extracts more and more work, time and mind space from its employees by branding it as 'play', 'growth' or 'family', but will very often avoid the topic of risks and dividends.

Living, breathing and thinking about work at all times, I as an employee realised that we are being fooled into thinking we have 'ownership', so we work more. This 'cult of work' makes us sacrifice everything - our health, our well-being, our social life - and it happens slowly and insidiously.

The week that I lost my eyesight and the many weeks that I spent recuperating after, I mostly felt guilty. Guilty that I hadn't taken care of myself. Guilty I left my colleagues in a lurch. Guilty that I dropped the ball on my last project. I internalised all this guilt knowing very well that my body was under a lot of duress because of work.

While talking about the 'eye incident' with friends and acquaintances, similar stories would crop up. A friend working in a tech startup spoke about a young employee with a chronic illness who kept missing her doctors appointment due to the intense amount of workload, and passed out at work. When she was admitted to a hospital and regained consciousness her first request was for someone to mail the boss that she won't be coming in for a few days. "She didn't tell anyone at work about her condition. Why? I just don't understand." said my friend.

I understood.

This is how the cult of work under neoliberalism dehumanizes us in our own eyes. I always knew this but hearing stories similar to mine over and over, verified it.

In this ecosystem, the only form of resistance we truly have, outside of quitting are 'whining' sessions. A temporary salve that makes us realise that we are not alone and our miseries are shared by our co-workers. At times, even the bosses joined these sessions. To them the 'lack of life' due to the cult of work was a shared suffering. No one ever pointed out that the bosses own the profits

that can keep them afloat for a very long time if they were to shut shop. That wasn't true for the employees.

I harbour no ill will towards them or their naiveté. We are all victims of neoliberalism, some are more unequal. I'd often remark that employees at BurnoutStudio should unionize. At the time I didn't know much about unions, except that they represent workers' concerns. "But we are so privileged. Don't unions work with factories and stuff?". I didn't have an answer then.

It took me 2 years to find out and eventually join a union. It was an extremely circuitous journey. I joined a Marxist study circle in Delhi and eventually got involved in a left mass youth organisation. Through them I learnt more about working class politics and trade union history in India. I did all of this because I was very angry. The horror stories I heard from others about similar health incidents, only emboldened me.

My peers feel that my quest for better mental health and figuring out 'work-life' balance took a radical turn, but I don't think joining a union is radical. I think it is necessary and just. Not just for technology workers, but specially for them.

Our generation (people in early twenties to late thirties) is probably the second, at most, the third generation to work in the professional services sector. My grandfather was a small farmer. My father's generation was the first in his family to get higher education and work in a professional job as liberalisation

took roots. Mine is the second generation in our family. Growing up as kids, we barely saw our father. He was in the development sector working 10 odd hours a day, and also went to the office on weekends. My mother was a government employee working in a bank. She had closest to what one might consider 'work life balance'. She worked and took care of the homestead as well.

Many of my peers, like me, are unmarried, or don't have kids. We like to think it is because we are anti-establishment, but the truth is we can barely take care of ourselves. I shudder to think how things will be for the next generation if this goes unchecked.

There is a famous [May Day poster](#) that was created in the 1800s during the eight-hour workday movement - a pivotal moment in labor history that set 8 hours as the remit of a workday for generations to come. The poster says '**8 hours' labour, 8 hours' recreation, 8 hours' rest.**' When this motto was coined industrial workers were working 12-16 hours a day, six days a week. Seems like we might be coming back full circle.

Today, the neoliberal workplace has eaten into recreation time by equating work with enjoyment; and most of us are probably thinking about work before we go to sleep, and the moment we wake up. With Covid-19 and 'Work From Home' becoming a norm the notional delineation between the three will all but fade away. The onus of striking a balance between labour, recreation and rest also lies on the individual, which in all honesty, feels like more work.

As a result, our bodies and minds are tired from being wrung out to maximise productivity and profits for companies, while we deal with alienation, physical/ mental exhaustion and burnout.

This is why I think a union is necessary. It empowers employees and workers by making them aware of tactics used by companies to overwork and underpay them. It takes everyday forms of resistance and magnifies them towards action and change for all workers. Everything we take for granted - a weekend, health benefits, equal pay for women, etc - came from centuries of organised struggles by workers' unions, not from employers.

You might not be ready to join a union today, but the union is here for you whenever you need it.

In the meanwhile, as an employee, question everything, specially when its sold under the garb of productivity or beneficence. If your company installs a work tracking software, ask them why it doesn't log and compensate you for overtime. When you're offered flexible work hours, track if you're working more than you had expected to. If your company pushes for work from home as a policy because it's 'convenient for you', ask them if the money they save on rent and utilities will be added to employees' salaries.

I asked myself if I had gone half blind, would I be promoted as I was promised? Would I even be valued if I was less productive? The answer is what compelled me to join AIITEU.



**DEAR IT EMPLOYEES,  
IS WORKING FROM HOME DRIVING  
YOU UP THE WALL?**

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All India IT and ITes Employees' Union

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