

# "When workers struggle, isn't it something to make the land proud?"

- Radical poet Vayalar Ramavarma  
1928-1975

Over two days – January 8th & 9th – over 160 million workers went on strike in India. This has been one of the largest general strikes in the world. The workers, exhausted by almost three decades of neo-liberal policies and by the attack on the rights of workers, came onto the streets to make their case for better livelihood and workplace democracy. Blockades on train tracks and on national highways closed down sections of the country. In Bengaluru, Information Technology workers joined the strike, while in Himachal Pradesh workers gathered to demand an end to precarious employment in government service. Workers from a broad range of sectors, from industrial workers to health care workers, joined the strike. There has been no response from the government.

This strike comes after the powerful **Woman's Wall built on 1 January- 5.5 million women in the Indian state of Kerala (population 35 million) built a 386-mile wall with their bodies. They stood from one end to the other of this long state in southwestern India. The women gathered at 4 p.m. and took a vow to defend the renaissance traditions of their state and to work towards women's empowerment. It is not an exaggeration to say that this was one of the largest mobilizations of women in the world for women's rights. Larger than the historical Women's March in Washington, D.C. in 2017.**

Kerala's government is run by the Communists. It is not easy for a left-wing government to operate in a state within the Indian union. The Central Government in New Delhi has little desire to assist Kerala, which suffered a cataclysmic flood last year. No assistance with the budgetary burdens of relief and reconstruction, and no help with financing for infrastructure and welfare services. The Communist government has a wide-ranging agenda that runs from its Green Kerala Mission — a project for stewardship of the state's beautiful environment — to its fight for women's emancipation. The **Left Democratic Front** government believes that dignity is a crucial goal as economic rights, and that it is centrally important to fight against everyday humiliation to build a truly just society.

Over the course of the left's government in Kerala, it has pushed ahead the agenda against everyday humiliation. For instance, in 2017, the government provided free sanitary pads for young women in school. The logic was that during their periods, young women who could not afford sanitary pads avoided school. Prejudices against menstruation had become a barrier to equal education. The government called this project "She Pad," which benefited students and teachers. Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of Kerala, said of the effort, "Menstrual hygiene is every girl's right. The government is hoping that initiatives like these will help our girls to lead a life of confidence."

A hundred miles north of Kerala's capital — Thiruvananthapuram — sits a temple for Ayyappan, a celibate god. Women between the ages of 10 and 50 had not been permitted into the temple due to a belief that the celibate god would not be able to tolerate women who menstruate. The Indian Supreme Court took notice of this and, in September 2018, declared that the temple must allow all women to enter. The Left Democratic Front government agreed with the courts. But the temple authorities, and the far-right groups in the state, disagreed. When women tried to enter the temple, the priests blocked them, assisted by the far right. The situation was at a deadlock.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan called upon progressive organizations across the state to start mobilizing the citizens toward the building of a Women's Wall (Vanitha Mathil) on Jan. 1. The energy in the state was electric. Women gathered at hundreds of mass meetings across the state. They recognized immediately that this was not a fight only to enter a temple, but this was a fight principally for women's emancipation, for the right of women, as Vijayan had said, "to lead a life of confidence."

The public meetings in November and December galvanized the opposition to the far right, arguing that women have every right to enter public spaces, including religious buildings. January began in anticipation. Women had been organized by districts and knew where to go. Women of all ages and backgrounds, from schoolteachers to members of the fishing community, began to line up around 3 p.m. After taking an oath, they marched through their towns and cities. They exuded joy and confidence, a freedom that should warm the hearts of sensitive people.

**Strikingly, the media outside India paid little attention to this global, historical event.** Press



coverage in the United States was nearly absent. Internationalism in our time is such a façade, with so little care to amplify the bravery of people around the world. When the Women's March took place in Washington, D.C., newspapers in Kerala reported it in detail. The favor was not returned. Silence was the answer.

Two days after the Women's Wall, the right-wing in Kerala went on a rampage. Their members attacked the leaders on the left and threw bombs at government buildings. Over 700 people — mostly men on the far right — were arrested that day.

Walking down a main shopping street in Thiruvananthapuram, I see visible signs of the far-right's attack. On one side of the street are posters and signs of left organizations torn and broken during the day of rampage by the far right. On the other side of the street, far-right supporters sit on a hunger strike.

Even liberals have taken the side of the far right. One liberal politician said that while he favored women's rights, he also favored the temple's rights. But the temple has no rights, nor does tradition. As Gandhi wrote almost a hundred years ago, **"If I can't swim in tradition, I'll sink in it."** Neither the temple nor tradition trumps the rights of women to live with confidence. If a tradition is discriminatory, it deserves to be set aside.

There are no half measures in this debate in Kerala. The mood is that one must not walk away from one's principles.

5.5 million women in Kerala — one in three women in the state — took to the streets to champion the emancipation of women. What brought them to join the Women's Wall was that the Left Democratic Front government took a clear position, a principled position: that menstruation should not be used as a penalty against women's full participation in society. Clarity defines the struggle. It is a lesson worth learning around the world.

**The workers strike comes as workers around the world greeted 2019 with a wave of demonstrations** — from the 'month of anger' launched in Morocco by trade unions to the protests in Sudan over rising prices, from the strikes of teachers in Los Angeles (USA) to the potential general strike in Nigeria over wages. An International Trade Union Confederation report from last year showed that 'More countries are excluding workers from labour laws' — 65% of countries, at last count, excluding migrant workers and public sector employees and others from the rights afforded to them. There is every indication that the attack on workers' rights and workplace democracy will continue despite the unrest amongst workers.

Brinda Karat, a leader of the Communist Party of India, reflects on the record of the current far right government in India (the BJP) and on the challenges before the Left to produce an alternative agenda to put before the people in the April 2019 General Election. Karat offers a sharp assessment of the attacks on women and the denigration of the project of women's emancipation in India.

Over the past several decades, women have entered public spaces to work and to live. They have established their talents, their skills, and their capacities

in numerous spheres. There has been a backlash against this increased assertion. The backlash is shaped by extreme misogyny — or a strong feeling in sections of our society that women have a specific place and anyone who crosses the boundary is liable to be punished. These cultural walls behind which women and girls are expected to live (with some exceptions for certain classes), are stronger than the high walls of a prison. When a woman is raped, she is blamed for entering public space, for being a free citizen, for the clothes she wears, for the person she speaks to, for the place and time where she was. It is the woman who is held responsible for the crime. That is the character of the misogyny.

Karat's interview goes into depth about the difficult situation under the government of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For example, she makes the following points; Because of India's government policies, agrarian distress is acute, an average of 12,000 farmers committed suicide every year of this government's rule. Unemployment is at its highest.

India stands out for its increased inequalities in this period of Modi's rule. Just 1% of the population holds 68% of all household wealth, an almost twenty-point increase in the last five years. On the other hand, according to the government's socio-economic survey, over 90% of India's people have an income of less than 10,000 rupees a year (US \$143).

It is not axiomatic that high inequality and social distress lead to a progressive politics. In such a context, it is as likely that the culture of working-class solidarity erodes, and social violence grows, producing the seedbed of neo-fascist politics. To that end, Karat makes the case that the Left in India — but also elsewhere — needs to engage with the rigidities of our culture.

Cultures promoted by capitalism and the market promote and glorify individualism and promote individualistic solutions. All these add to the depoliticization of a whole generation of young people. This is certainly a challenge: how to find the most effective ways of taking our message to the youth. Then again in India class exploitation is intensified through the caste system and vice versa. To build resistance struggles against the caste system and caste oppression and to link such struggles with the fight against capitalism in terms of struggles and goals is also a challenge. Trade unions and other class organizations certainly have to be more assertive and attentive to these aspects.

The Left, Karat suggests, needs to enter fully into the struggle over how to define the terms of a culture. Questions of dignity as well as discrimination are fundamental to the development of a progressive politics. No emancipatory movement can turn its back on any form of social hierarchy. The democratic impulse must work its way into the most rigid of cultural forms.

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