

PERSECUTED PRISONERS SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE (PPSC)

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Stop Crackdown on Mazdoor Sangathan Samiti in Jharkhand!

Persecuted Prisoners Solidarity Committee (PPSC) notes with concern the manner in which Mazdoor Sangathan Samiti (MSS), a registered trade union and its members are being targeted by the Government of Jharkhand. The trade union has been banned and thirteen of its members have been booked at Giridih under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, and s. 17 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1908. Out of thirteen, three have been facing incarceration since 24th December 2017. Six others at Bokaro have also been booked under s. 17 CLA on 30th December.

MSS has been active since 1989 among workers in Giridih, Bokaro, Dhanbad, Hazaribagh, Ranchi, Ramgarh, Gaya, Kharsawan and Jhalda districts with a membership of around 22,000 workers. In Madhuban, where the union first faced a crackdown, members include '*doli mazdoors*' who facilitate the Jain pilgrims in visiting the hilltop *Parsnath Shikharji* temple. The '*doli mazdoors*' had been collecting Rs. 10 each from the pilgrims towards a welfare fund, proceeds of which have been used to provide medical aid to workers in case of illness, accidents and death. A *Shramjeevi* hospital for workers was opened in 2013 using the fund. MSS has been on the radar since it exposed the fake encounter killing of one of their members Motilal Baske in June 2017, who was in fact killed by the State force. The union has also been protesting against the amendments to the land laws (Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act 1908 and Santhal Pargana Act 1949) aimed at dispossessing Adivasis and Moolvasis of their land.

An FIR was first lodged on 7th November 2017 at Mufassil Giridih Police Station twelve members of MSS including at least seven of its office bearers and 800 unknown persons. On this day MSS had organised a programme and rally marking 100 years of Bolshevik Revolution in Giridih. According to the Samiti, the rally was conducted in a peaceful manner. However, the twelve members and 800 unknown persons have been accused of rioting and provoking breach of peace among other offences. Later on 22nd December, MSS was banned by the Home Department using powers granted under section 16 of the CLA Act, 1908 through which it has been declared to be an unlawful association being stated as a "frontal organisation of the CPI (Maoist)". Membership, donations to and publishing or possessing any material related to their "extremist policies" has been declared illegal. Further, just two days later, in the night intervening between 23rd and 24th December, three of its members Ajay Hembrom, Dayachand Hembrom and Mohan Murmu have been arrested from their Madhuban office and ten others along with the three have been booked for extortion and participating in 'unlawful activities'. What has been alleged to be extortion and unlawful activities is the very collection of the nominal contribution of ten rupees from pilgrims towards welfare of '*doli mazdoors*'. On 30th December, a raid was then conducted at the

Bokaro office of MSS and an FIR lodged against members active in Bokaro Thermal area whereby they have been booked under s.17 CLA and accused of aiding the CPI (Maoist). An activist with the *Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan* Damodar Turi has also been booked in the Bokaro case, even though he is not a member of MSS.

Presently incarcerated in Giridih district jail, all three are local adivasi youth who have been working as members at the Giridih unit of MSS. 25 year old Ajay Hembrom belongs to Kamarkocha village, Pirtand Block, Madhuban. He had been pursuing BA Final year from Giridih College, while also trying to earn a living through daily wage labour. His mother is a cook at an Anganwadi Centre and his younger brother is a daily wage labourer. His family also consists of his wife and children and his father who is mentally unwell. 18 year old Dayachand Hembrom hails from Jobhi village, Pirtand Block. He is the youngest of his siblings and was currently studying in 12th standard at a private school called Jharkhand Commerce College, Dumri. His father works as a security guard at a *dharmshala*, while his brother immediately elder to him does housekeeping jobs at another *dharmshala* in Madhuban. The eldest brother runs a grocery shop in the village and his mother tends to the little bit of land that the family has. 19 year old Mohan Murmu belonging to Jobhi Village, is a 10th standard dropout. His family has been completely dependent on him. He worked on the family land. His mother is no more and his 65 year old father is too frail to even walk on his own. One of his brothers is mentally unwell. The eldest brother has re-married, deserted the family and left behind two of his children from his first wife, since deceased. The two children had also been under the care of Mohan.

The crackdown on MSS has accelerated. The Trade Union and its members continue to face an arbitrary ban. Its Madhuban and Bokaro offices have been raided and sealed by the police. Most MSS office bearers have the sword of a case or two hanging over their head. They have been booked under the harshest laws of the land. As a result, the three members facing incarceration have a bleak chance of being released anytime soon. The three incarcerated are adivasi youth out of which two are students and the third, a dropout, has a dependent family left behind. Activist Damodar Turi of the *Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan* was acquitted in another case on 19th December 2017 but has now been named again in the Bokaro case.

It is condemnable that a three decade old trade union and its members are being persecuted by the Government of Jharkhand. We demand the following immediate action:

1. The ban on MSS be revoked.
2. The cases against MSS members and other named activists be withdrawn.
3. Ajay Hembrom, Dayachand Hembrom and Mohan Murmu be released.

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PPSC