

# The Almond Workers of Karawal Nagar, Delhi: A Report

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I live in the United States and often take almonds as gifts when I visit India. They are cheaper in the United States I say. It seems one reason they are cheaper is because my countrymen process them for two dollars a day, among other places in a locality in northeast Delhi, called Karawal Nagar.

In December 2009, nearly twenty thousand almond workers (badam mazdoors) in Karawal Nagar (close to the Delhi-Ghaziabad border) went on strike demanding enforcement of basic labor laws such as a minimum wage, double overtime pay, and job cards. It was one of the largest unorganized sector strikes in Delhi's history. The strike lasted for two weeks (Dec. 16- Dec 31) and paralyzed the almond processing industry during one of its peak seasons.

The strike resulted in a partial victory for the workers. These were not workers in a long established union or workers who all worked in one or a handful of large factories. Rather they were unorganized (informal) sector workers working in dispersed locations, many in godowns housing 50 of them, some at home, spread all over a large residential neighborhood on Delhi's periphery. Their union, the Badam Mazdoor Union, was also new, having been formed only a year and half ago, in June 2008.

By all accounts then, this was a significant event in the India's industrial history. And yet, three or four different types of people I spoke to in Delhi, academics, left political activists, were completely unaware of it and it was severely underreported in the media. When I visited the almond workers on January 11th 2010, the strike had only just ended.

The manner in which I reached Karawal Nagar is testimony to its remoteness from the center of metropolitan Delhi. I happened to be staying with a friend in Delhi University faculty housing, already quite far from both Lutyens Delhi of the powerbrokers and South Delhi of the intellectuals. Taking the metro, (itself the product of sweated labor working in hellish conditions, but more on that some other time) I reached the last station on the line, Jahangir Puri. From the station I took an auto first to an area called Samaypur-Badli, an industrial belt in north Delhi.

I was due to meet Satyam Varma who works for a Marxist publishing house as well as for Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS), a Bhagat Singh inspired socialist organization that works with the help of students in organizing informal sector workers. Their mouthpiece is Bigul (<http://sites.google.com/site/bigulakhbar/>). At Mr. Varma's office I was introduced to Yogesh,

an NBS worker who has worked closely with the Badam Mazdoor Union (BMU). Yogesh and I rode an auto for nearly half an hour, from Samaypur-Badli to Khajuri Junction on the eastern side of the Yamuna. From Khajuri a local share auto took us to Karawal Nagar.

We left the auto on the road going towards Ghazipur, UP, and descended into the pit of Karawal Nagar, below road level. Instantly it was clear that this was a world different from DLF City in Gurgaon or Delhi University where I had spent the last few days. But I also knew that this wasn't just an urban slum or working class residential neighborhood. Rather, as in many other cities and towns of India, it was a site of production and consumption, the factory and the home in one.

Satyam Varma had spoken about the challenges of organizing workers in the face of increasing casualization and informalization of the industrial laborforce in India (and indeed worldwide). Over three-quarters of the manufacturing workforce in India is categorized as informal, meaning that it labors under precarious conditions, without regular pay, working hours, or basic facilities such as toilets, paid weekly time-off etc. Informal employment does not only mean own-account enterprises or very small firms, but increasingly larger firms are retaining a minimum core of regular, salaried employees while sub-contracting out as many activities as possible.

The construction industry is the archetypal example of this, as is Delhi's Metro, but diverse industries now follow the practice. Mr. Varma pointed out that the putting-out mode of production widely prevalent in the informal sector, wherein a merchant hires contractors or middlemen to carry work to the workers' homes or at least their neighborhoods, makes it necessary for labor organizers to work in bastis (neighborhoods) as opposed to organizing in factories. The dispersion of manufacturing activity, often undertaken by capitalists as a conscious tool to break working class solidarity, necessitates new ways of labor organizing.

The Karawal Nagar Badam Mazdoor Union is one example of this new way.

## **Political Economy**

Yogesh took me to the modest offices of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, situated in the heart of Karawal Nagar, where he introduced me to Navin, another youth organizer, who was cooking lunch. The room was papered liberally with slogans and quotations from Bhagat Singh. Across the street were the newly constructed premises of the BMU, made with the help of shramdaan (donated labor) of the almond workers.

Along the way I had been informed as to the basic political economy of almond processing (see schematic). Delhi is home to one of Asia's largest dry fruits markets. Raw almonds come here from all over the First World, the US, Australia, Canada, Europe, for processing. Merchants in the Khari Baoli area import raw almonds and sub-contract their deshelling out

to contractors in the Karawal Nagar area. Each contractor has a godown where almonds are stored and often also processed. There are around sixty such godown-cum-factories in Karawal Nagar. The contractors hire workers to do the processing.

Upto fifty workers may work for a single employer in his godown. A skilled worker can remove the almond intact resulting in Grade A almonds. Successively more damage results in Grades B, C, D etc. Workers are mostly migrant labor from outside Delhi, either Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. So are the contractors. From the outside a godown/factory looks no different from a large residence. For an outsider, there is almost no way to know that a large industry is located here. The only tell-tale signs are heaps of almonds, in shells or deshelled lying in an open courtyard outside an occasional worker's residence and a few women hard at work deshelling. Some processing is put-out to workers' homes. Both men and women work in this industry. The contractors, mostly hailing from the same ethnicity as the workers, live among the workers, except in larger, fancier dwellings.



Almond workers, till last year, were receiving Rs. 40 per bag (containing 23 kg unprocessed almonds). On average a worker can deshell two bags a day. The contractor may receive upto Rs. 300 per bag from the Khari Baoli merchants. The merchants in turn may sell the processed almonds for as much as Rs. 7000 per bag. This value chain is typical of several

informal sector putting-out arrangements, where most of the “value-added” is an artefact of steps that actually add no value to the product at all. The schematic depicts the value-chain very approximately. It is clear that large profits are being made in the industry even by the contractors who are relatively small fry in the entire set-up. If they aren’t making large profits on every bag, wherefrom have these mansions come? Asks Yogesh rhetorically. Displaying solidarity the godown owners also convened a meeting after the BMU strike began, and collected Rs. 80,000 to bribe the police into taking action against the union leaders. The police and the administration have generally been hostile to the BMU workers and appear to have been bought by the contractors.

## **Organizing History and Demands**

Not surprisingly, the Almond Workers struggle has been largely unreported in the media. Bigul (<http://sites.google.com/site/bigulakhbar/>) has carried reports of it, as has Radical Notes (see further reading).

Since employment contracts are casual in the industry, even though workers have a fixed employer at whose godown they always work, no labor laws are enforced. The first battle that the workers fought was in fact to get officials to recognize that an industry existed in Karawal Nagar and to get minimum labor laws enforced.

The Naujawan Bharat Sabha and Bigul Mazdoor Dasta together carried forward a spontaneous workers’ movement in Karawal Nagar that began in 2007. There were some efforts at creating a union by CPI-ML (Liberation) activists in May-June 2008. However these failed, according to reports in Bigul, due to lack of honest leadership and political opportunism on part of the Liberation workers. NBS and BMD intervened in June 2008 and took the process for forming a union forward. NBS had already been working in the area for around five years and was familiar to the workers. The Badam Mazdoor Union was formed with their help in July 2008 and the first strike took place in August 2008. The principal demands were:

### *Demands of August 2008 strike*

1. Minimum wage should be paid. This is Rs. 140 per day, and hence piece rate should be Rs. 70 per bag instead of Rs. 40 per bag.
2. Issuance of cards, which provide proof of employment and record of work done.
3. Double rate overtime for work done beyond 9 hours in a day.
4. Godowns housing 20 or more women workers must have a day care facility for children.
5. Godowns housing more than 25 workers (men or women) must have toilet facilities.

The strike lasted 16 days with the participation of thousands of workers, itself no mean achievement for workers earning close to \$2 a day. During the strike, community kitchens were run with donations from supporting citizenry of the surrounding region since many workers could no longer afford food after striking for so long.

However, despite all this, the strike resulted in very modest gains for the workers. Wages rose by ten rupees to Rs. 50 per bag. But the price of the shells, which are sold back to the workers as cooking fuel, was raised from Rs. 10 to Rs. 20 per bag, nullifying the wage increase. A pamphlet issued by the Badam Mazdoor Union after the strike gave the following causes for the strike's failure:

#### *Causes of failure of August 2008 strike*

1. Underestimating the employers' lasting power in face of the strike.
2. Mistaking the employer's staff for an ally.
3. Regionalism among the workers on the basis of place of origin (Bihar, UP highlands versus plains etc).
4. Placing trust in rumours spread by the contractors.
5. Lack of courage among workers.

It took another year and a half, till December 2009, for the second strike to be organized, this time fully under the leadership of the Badam Mazdoor Union. The demands this time were:

#### *Demands of December 2009 strike*

1. A minimum piece rate of Rs. 80 per bag (up from the current Rs. 50)
2. Almond shells used as cooking fuel by the workers to be given to them free of charge instead of the arbitrary prices now being charged by the contractors.
3. Previous month's wages to be paid in full before the 7th of each month.
4. Identity card to be issued for each worker by the respective employers.
5. Job card (recording the work done) to be issued for each worker by the employer.
6. Stop abuse of workers by employers.

The strike resulted in a partial victory for the workers. Wages were increased to Rs. 60 and the price of almond shells was set at Rs. 20 a bag. The contractors agreed to pay wages before the 7th of each month and workers report that verbal abuse, particularly towards women, has lessened.

## In the worker alleys

Walking through the narrow alleys of the various bastis of Karawal Nagar, I see dilapidated houses on either side occasionally interrupted by a two storey, clearly affluent structure, a godown perhaps, or a contractor's dwelling. Navin, Yogesh and I reached the house of a woman worker who had been called from her workplace to talk with us for a bit.

We sit along with three almond workers, two men and a woman, in an open dirt compound on empty almond sacks. These almonds came from California, I read the faded lettering on the bags. Behind us is a row of 8 by 8 or 10 by 10 rooms, the workers' homes for which they pay Rs. 500 a month as rent. Were the workers who took a lead in the strike singled out by the contractors later? Not given work perhaps? I ask. This happened to some extent, says Navin, but not a whole lot and eventually the employers understood that more victimization would precipitate another action from the workers.

As mentioned earlier, one of the demands this time was that wages for the previous month's work should be paid by the end of the first week of every month. We are discussing one delinquent contractor who has not done so. The woman worker shows us the work record diary, the pages of which contain columns of figures, the date, the number of bag shelled, wages owed by the contractor and his signature indicating that he agrees with the work record.

*I haven't given him the diary, it's my only record of the work I have done. I have told him, show me the money and I will bring the diary, she says.*

*Yes, and we will do one thing, says the man sitting next to me, we will photocopy the whole diary before we hand it over to him.* The contractor in question, referred to as "Neta" because he has taken the lead in organizing the contractors, has been stalling on paying wages since September 2009, on the pretext of his daughter's upcoming marriage and because he is involved in buying a plot of land. *What do we want with the stories of buying a plot or of his daughter's wedding?* The woman worker exclaims. *We are concerned with our wages. He has not paid up for 4-5 months, upto Rs 11,000 arrears for a single worker!*

Next, one of the men starts explaining to me the nature of their work. As with many occupations the university-educated elite likes to call unskilled or semi-skilled, the worker himself clearly takes pride in the knowledge and skill required to do the work well. After deshelling, the almonds have to be sorted into various grades, he says, listing them one by one; those that are intact, those in two pieces, the rotten ones, and so on, into seven different categories. We get one bag from the contractor and take back seven different packages. This sorting work takes a long time, but is not paid for separately. Clearly, a lot of skill goes, not only into deshelling properly but also in quickly sorting the various grades. This

became particularly clear during the strike when the contractors brought in scab labor to break the strike. But the less-skilled new workers damaged many almonds in the process of deshelling. This resulted in large losses for the contractors.

## Lessons

As the BMU activists often say, this is only the beginning of the struggle (*abhi to yeh angDai hai, aage aur laDaai hai*). Despite the prolonged and massive strike, the victory has been very partial at best, with the wage increase not even keeping pace with inflation in prices of essential commodities. However, given the difficulties of organizing such a dispersed and exploited workforce, the BMU campaign has been no mean achievement.

Beyond the immediate gains are the longer term gains of being organized, and beyond that are the lessons learned, which can be used in other informal sector labor struggles. At the start of the 21st century, we see the majority of the world's industrial workforce laboring outside of large factories, it is time labor organizing made informal sector workers the centerpiece of its activity.

Further Reading:

1. Badam Mazdoor Union Press Releases (given below)

2. Radical Notes Reports:

<http://radicalnotes.com/journal/2009/12/19/struggle-of-delhis-almond-workers-living-under-the-yoke-of-global-profit-mongers/>

and

<http://radicalnotes.com/journal/2009/12/19/almond-workers-strike-into-its-fourth-day-delhis-almond-processing-industry-paralysed/>

and

<http://radicalnotes.com/journal/2009/12/20/almond-workers-strike-one-of-the-largest-unorganized-workers-strike-in-delhi/>

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## BMU Press Releases

### **Press Release Dec 23 2009: Two Thousand Almond Workers' Stage a Massive Protest at Jantar-Mantar**

*Demanded implementation of Labour Laws, condemned the collusion of Police with contractors and employers*

December 23, New Delhi. Nearly 2000 almond workers staged a huge demonstration at Jantar-Mantar in the afternoon under the leadership of 'Badaam Mazdoor Union'. As is well known, approximately 20 thousand almond workers have been on strike for past one week. These workers organized themselves into 'Badaam Mazdoor Union' (BMU) a year ago and since then, they have been fighting for the rights to which they are entitled under various labour laws. The BMU declared strike in the almond processing industry located in Karawal Nagar which is situated in the North-East Delhi, following which 20 thousand workers' families stopped work, who were engaged in this work. Due to this strike the entire almond processing industry of Delhi has come to a standstill. This pressure is hurting even more because these almonds come from the US, Canada and Australia to India for processing, after which they have to be sent back. These companies outsource the work of processing to India to exploit the extremely cheap labour of India. Khari Baoli, situated in Delhi, is the largest dry fruits market of Asia. The big businessmen located in Khari Baoli take contract for this processing work and then give it on subcontract to petty contractors situated in Karawal Nagar. These petty contractors get this work done by poor labourers on wages which are next to nothing. The workers are given a mere Rs. 50 for the processing of one 23 kg bag of almonds. The total profit on one bag of almonds is around Rs. 7000. Of this profit, one share goes to the foreign company, another to the big businessmen of Khari Baoli, and yet another to the petty contractor who play in lakhs of rupees, while the workers are constantly on the verge of starvation.

Workers who came to Jantar-Mantar demanded that this almond processing industry which runs in Karawal Nagar and some other areas of Delhi should be given a formal status by the government and it should be regularized, as not a few hundreds are involved in this industry, but thousands of workers are toiling in it to earn a meagre livelihood. Ashish Kumar, Convener of BMU told the mediapersons that the contractors who are at the helm of the affairs in this industry laugh away the labour laws and exploiting the workers in a primitive and barbaric way. It is one of the most glaring example of wage slavery in modern times and that too in the heart of National Capital. For this, they have squandered away money to collude with the Police and local musclemen and political leaders. Against this dictatorship and exploitation, the workers in this strike are demanding that this industry be regularized by the government and labour laws be implemented. The second demand of the workers is that the workers should be given Rs 80 per processed bag of almonds rather than Rs 50. That would be equivalent to minimum wages. Besides, these contractors have not provided the workers with any identity card of job card due to which often they refuse to make due payments to the workers and the latter have no proofs whatsoever, to make a claim. The BMU also demanded that double payment should be made for the overtime. Apart from that, the contractors sell the rind of almonds to the workers. The workers use it as fuel to cook food. As this is a useless by-product of the process of processing done by the workers themselves, it should not be sold to the workers. It should be given to them free of cost. The workers also demanded that the Police should lodge an F.I.R. against those goons of the employers who attacked BMU leaders and women workers with deadly weapons on the

morning of December 17. Ironically enough, the Karawal Nagar Police arrested the Union leaders instead of arresting the contractors and their goons and lodged a F.I.R. against them under section 107 and section 151 and sent them to jail, from where they were released on bail on December 19. The BMU leaders also demanded action against the Karawal Nagar Police.

This strike which started on December 16, is being already hailed as one of the biggest unorganized workers' strike in the history of Delhi. Almost 20 thousand workers' families are involved in it. The whole almond processing industry of Delhi has been paralysed due to this strike. Due to the stoppage of almond supply, the prices of almond are increasing. On the other hand, the contractors are dreaming of crushing this huge movement of workers with the muscle power of their goons and tacit support of the Police administration. However, the workers are in no mood to surrender and they are intensifying their strike with every passing day. The BMU leadership demanded the Labour minister of Delhi and the Deputy Labour Commissioner of North-East Delhi to intervene in the matter and ensure the implementation of the labour rights of these workers. If the snatching away of workers' rights goes on like this, then the workers will gherao the Labour Minister and Chief Minister of Delhi. It is the right opportunity for them to become cautious and implement these laws. They also warned the employers and contractors to wake up before the time runs out. They warned them not to try strength of the workers as it might cost dearly to their profit machinery. They cannot defeat organized working class power with petty street goons. They need to implement the labour laws and give the workers what they are legally entitled to.

### **Press Release Dec 31 2009: Historical Strike of Almond Workers completes two weeks**

*Strike continues under the leadership of Badaam Mazdoor Union. Thousands of Workers uncompromising on their demands*

December 31, New Delhi. The historical strike of almond workers of Delhi completed its two weeks on December 30. As is well known, almond workers of Karawal Nagar area of North-East Delhi are on strike since December 16 under the leadership of Badaam Mazdoor Union, with the demands of implementation of labour laws and granting formal status to this completely informal almond processing industry worth millions of rupees. There is an extensive almond processing industry in the Karawal Nagar area in which 60 almond processing godowns are functioning. Nearly 20 thousand workers are employed in this industry who are presently at strike. This whole industry is linked with the global market as the almonds processed in it come from USA, Australia, etc. The unprocessed almonds are imported by the importers of Khari Baoli, which is the largest dry fruits market of Asia. It is located in the Old Delhi. These importers give these almonds to the petty contractors of Karawal Nagar on contract for processing. Due to this strike, the big importers of Khari Baoli and the petty contractors of Karawal Nagar are facing a crisis of existence, as 80 percent of almond supply has stopped. As a consequence, the rates of almond in the markets have shot up by 30 to 40 percent.

The workers are demanding that the contractors of almond implement the minimum labour laws. Presently, they are being paid Rs. 50 per bag of processed almonds which is Rs. 50 less than the minimum wages which are in effect in Delhi, because a skilled almond worker can process at most two bags of almonds if he or she works for more than 12 hours. That means that his/her day wage equals to maximum Rs. 100 per day. Apparently, this kind of wages is not sufficient for livelihood. As a consequence, the workers have to employ all of their families into this work which often includes children. Besides, these unprocessed almonds come to processing after being soaked in acid due to which workers have to face a lot of health hazards, for example, their hands become badly bruised, nails start melting, and also various kinds of lung conditions arise. Going by the law of minimum wages, these workers should be given Rs. 80 for every bag of processed almonds. Reportedly, the godown owners get Rs. 125 to Rs. 150 per bag of unprocessed almonds. And yet, the contractors are insisting that they would not give more than Rs. 60 per bag. However, the workers are not ready to work below Rs. 70 per bag. Ashish Kumar, convener of Badaam Mazdoor Union, contended that if almond processing industry has to continue functioning in the Karawal Nagar area, the contractors will have to pay Rs. 70 per bag of processed almonds. Firstly, these godowns are functioning illegally in this area, and secondly, they are laughing away all labour laws. In such case, either these contractors will be forced to close their godowns and would not be allowed to open godowns in any area of Delhi, or they will be forced to grant the rights of labourers, to which they are entitled under the labour laws.

After the beginning of the strike, the contractors used all kinds of means to break the unity of the workers. First of all, on December 17, the goons of contractors attacked the workers and their leaders and then getting the Police administration into its pocket, got F.I.R. lodged against Union leaders themselves. Three union leaders spent two days in Jail and then got released on bail. But, this, in spite of breaking the unity of workers, strengthened it even further and the strike which involved 60 percent of workers, now had 90 percent of total workers in its support. Following this, the owners tried to run their godowns under Police protection, but the picketing teams of women workers agitated militantly and got these godowns closed and took their labourers in the support of strike. After that, one of the owners, Mr. Vasudev Mishra, who also contested in the MCD elections last year as an independent candidate, attacked the women workers with a stick, but in retaliation women workers beat him up and got him arrested by the Police. However, as is usual with the arrest of owners, he was released after a few hours and no case was lodged against him. Frustrated with the failed attempts, now the owners tried to outsource their work to other areas of Delhi, however, they had to incur huge losses, because unskilled labour of some other areas, ruined a lot of almonds during the processing. And lastly, now the owners have resorted to the old technique of spreading rumours through various kinds of brokers among labourers to break their resilience. But this attempt, too is being foiled by the internal organization of the workers and Union leadership. The workers are unrelenting and demanding that either they will work on Rs. 70 per bag, or the whole almonds processing

industry will be vanished from the face of Delhi. They themselves will take legal initiative to get these unauthorized and illegal godowns closed down: within Karawal Nagar and beyond it.

Some of the godown owners are RSS cadre themselves and the RSS is constantly slandering against this workers' movement. Today, everyone in Delhi knows that this almond workers' strike is unique and unprecedented in every sense of the terms. Notably, these workers do not belong to a single factory or a few factories, who could be organized through old TradeUnionist methods. These workers are scattered across an extensive area. They cannot be found under one roof or in one area. This strike is proving to be the largest strike of completely unorganized workers in Delhi, involving more than 20 thousand workers' families. It has shaken the roots of the globally-linked almond processing industry of India. This huge movement of workers till now has not received any kind of support from any electoral party. On the contrary, all the local political leaders of these electoral parties are trying to sabotage this movement in every possible way. Despite all, these the workers have refused to succumb.

Yogesh, member of Badaam mazdoor Union said that the workers have prepared themselves that either their demands are met or this whole industry will be closed. They understand the fact that they are not dependent on their employers for their livelihood, on the contrary the employers are dependent on the workers. Police administration in face of the militant workers, is now reluctant to take any open offensive against the movement, however, it is trying to cut off the Union leadership from the workers secretly. They are propagating among workers that the Union people are "outsiders". Replying to this slandering, Yogesh of the Union, said that the Constitution of India gives every citizen of India the right to fight for the legal rights of any section of society including workers and he/she can help, support or even lead that section in the struggle for legal and constitutional rights. If the workers' rights activists of the Union which also include respectable researchers and students of Delhi University, are "outside elements", then Gandhi Ji was an outsider for the peasants of Champaran, Medha Patkar is and outsider for the people of Narmada Valley. This whole logic is promoted by the administration when it has to defend the 'privileges of the employers. Police officials are saying that the Union leadership is causing law and order situation in the whole area. But they are not telling, how are they doing so? Are they breaking any law? They are just trying to organize workers for their just demands. However, this indeed creates a "law and order situation" for the employers and hence, the "nation" and the "country", which obviously does not include the working class! Apparently, the Police administration's conception of "nation" and "country" is exclusive of the workers and peasants.

Abhinav, workers' rights activist, a researcher in Delhi University and correspondent of workers' monthly Bigul, said that every working class movement in this country is making it more and more obvious and apparent that all the instruments of the State, for example, the Police, military, judiciary, bureaucracy, etc, are working for the protection of the profit

machinery of the capitalist class and the property of the propertied class. If there is a just struggle for the legal rights of the workers and it becomes a menace for the smooth functioning of this exploitative machinery, the whole administration creates a hulabaloo of “law and order, unrest, anarchy, chaos” and embarks upon the suppression of this movement. The almond workers have staged a heroic struggle for their legal rights. But this struggle does not stop here, rather it starts from here. They will have to link their struggle to the working class struggles going on in this country and brace themselves for a struggle of systemic change. The problems of workers can be solved permanently only by this way.

### **Dec 31 2009 Press Release: 15-Day long strike of Almond Workers comes to conclusion**

*Struggle came to an end with a compromise between the employers and the Union*

December 31, New Delhi. The historical strike of almond workers continuing since last 15 days came to an end with a compromise between the employers and the Union. As is well known, this strike began on December 16 and around 20 thousand workers' families had been participating in it. It has already being hailed as the biggest and longest strike by the unorganized workers of Delhi. Before this compromise, the employer side and the Union had sat across the table for talks earlier also, however, those talks could not establish a common understanding. Following that bipartite, the strike continued and finally on the evening of December 31, a common agreement was reached between both the parties.

Before this 15-day long strike the almond workers had put forward a 5-point charter of demand under the leadership of Badaam Mazdoor Union (BMU), in front of the contractors. These primarily included the rights to which the workers are entitled under the labour laws. Earlier, the almond workers used to get a meagre Rs. 50 for processing of one bag of almonds. Besides, they used to be denied payment of wages for several months. Misbehaviour and abusing workers in godowns by the staff of contractors was a common thing. Moreover, the shells peeled off the almonds were sold to the workers on arbitrary prices fixed by the contractors. These shells are used as fuel for cooking by the workers. Under the leadership of the BMU, the workers had long been demanding that they should be given Rs. 70-80 per bag of processed almonds and the peeled off shells should be given to them at Rs. 10 per bag. They were also demanding that they should be given their due wages in the first week of every month.

The employers were rigid for last 15 days on not increasing the wages and they had been insisting that the workers should first of all call off the strike and return to work then, they will think about wage revision, and that too after January 16. However, the workers found this proposal unacceptable and continued with their strike. The employers' frustration grew with every passing day as their armoury had been emptied. One of the employers was beaten up by women picketers after he attacked the women workers, the Police administration failed to break the strike by threatening and intimidating workers' leaders, brokers also failed to break

the strike by spreading rumours. After December 29, it was clear that it was just a matter of time when the employers succumb and approaches the workers for compromise. On the morning of December 31, some employers accepted the demands of the workers without talks with the Union and started work. As a result the employers unity disintegrated and they bifurcated into two groups. At last, around 6 PM in the evening of the same day, both the sides held talks and it was decided that the employers will give Rs. 60 per bag of processed almonds to the workers, the peeled off shells will be sold at Rs. 20 per bag, and the workers will be paid their wages in the first week of every month.

With this compromise the workers called off their historical strike and they are returning to work from the first day of the New Year. With this the biggest strike of the unorganized workers of Delhi came to conclusion. Under the leadership of Badaam Mazdoor Union, thousands of unorganized workers proved that they can fight and they can win. Apparently, the workers could not win all of their demands. However, the issue in this strike now was not merely the revision of wages, etc. In an industry where the workers are made to toil like slaves in the most primitive conditions, constantly manhandled, facing abuses and misbehaviour and were considered an instrumentum vocale, the workers waged a heroic and historical struggle to win respect for them and win their minimum labour rights. The employers were, for the first time, made to realize the massive force of workers and were made to do away with their misunderstanding, that these workers will keep enduring their excesses silently and would not speak up. Towards the end of the struggle, the employers bowed down to the workers' power in every respect. Besides, not only the employers were made to realize the force of the united workers, but the population of the entire Karawal Nagar area understood the fact that these workers are not going to keep their lips zipped.

Another accomplishment of this strike was that the trade unions of parties like C.P.I. (M.L.) were sidelined by the workers consciously and they brought their struggle to an end under the leadership of the BMU, without any kind of support or help from any electoral party. The workers made it a point that they would not let any electoral party infiltrate into the movement. The workers rejected all varieties of brokers of electoral Trade Unions. They clearly understood the real character of the electoral parties, the R.S.S., Police administration and similar forces for the area and realized that they have to fight on their strength only, which is massive.

Ashish Kumar, convener of the BMU, told the media that this struggle is not an end, but a beginning. In future, the almond workers of Delhi will continue to fight under the banner of the BMU for those rights which are still out of their reach. Ashish said that till this whole industry continues to function informally, the workers will remain weak in their legal battle. The next aim of the Union is to make the government's labour department give formal status to this huge industry.

Abhinav, correspondent of labour monthly Bigul and a researcher of the unorganized workers of Delhi, said that this struggle will stay in the memories of the workers of Delhi for decades to come. This struggle was first of its kind and it dismantled this myth that the unorganized and informal sector workers cannot wage organized struggles. By organizing workers in their areas of residence and working class neighbourhoods, the struggle of the unorganized and scattered workers can be given an organized and huge form. Undoubtedly, it is a challenging task, however, this strike has emphatically proved that this challenge can be overcome.

[7 Comments »](#)

## 7 Responses to “The Almond Workers of Karawal Nagar, Delhi: A Report”

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1. *Anonymous* Says:

[February 22nd, 2010 at 09:24](#)

thanks for this article

nice

2. *shivarth and kunal* Says:

[February 23rd, 2010 at 10:16](#)

a report with a partisoned stand, and gives a wholesome picture of the plight of laborers working in unorganised sector

shivarth(u.p)

it presents an objective analysis of the situation in a very reader-friendly manner.

intellectuals with such a partisoned are stand are seldom found.

kunal ( delhi )

3. *Taki* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 17:46](#)

I enjoyed your article, Amit.

Taki

4. *Pradeep* Says:

[May 9th, 2012 at 03:39](#)

The article was indeed very useful. I live in Karawal Nagar but had hardly any idea of such a big setup of Almond Industry. Thanks for highlighting the same.

5. *vikram kumar* Says:

[September 2nd, 2014 at 10:25](#)

good to see such research on labours. very sad usa produces almonds and then makes way for child labour. indeed sad.

6. *Avinash singh* Says:

[March 10th, 2021 at 12:36](#)

Please refer me some almond processing unit in delhi Or gaziabad

7. *Arun* Says:

September 30th, 2023 at 11:56

Aaj bhi ISI prakar ho raha hai business

**Leave a comment**

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