

Rajshekhar Mantri

A short biographical note on Rajshekhar Mantri, General Secretary of the Vishakha Steel Plant Workers' Union, (INTUC), interviewed on September 14, 2004 at Ukkunagar, Vizag

Rajshekhar Mantri was born on June 30, 1961 at a village called Balacheru in Rajamundri. His father is a farmer and village headman in teh Revenue department. Rajshekhar studied upto primary level in Balacheru, his birth place the in Vizag till sixth standard. After that he went to Kaneithi for high school and every day he used to walk four miles to his school. For his intermediate classes, he went to Yellamanchili in Vizag district. Finally he graduated in commerce from Vizag.

After graduation, he got involved in the movement of displaced families' shelter and compensation issues that came up in course of the construction of the steel plant. It was a movement jointly launched by AITUC and INTUC and continued from 1980 to 1988. Meanwhile Rajshekhar completed his studies attending night classes. Compensation was given for dry land Rs 1800 per acre and for wetland it was Rs 2000 peracre. Later among many agitators who got employment in the steel plant, Rajshekhar was also absorbed. There were 64 villages displaced with 15000 families as each child who has become 18-year-old, was considered a unit. Each family got one employment. For the rest of the family members, they were trying to get employment even through contractors and 500 were taken in. Additional compensation was given.

There are 1600 regular and 3000 contract labour in the plant. Earlier there were many more contract workers but among them 6500 were slowly taken in regular employment in a phased manner as a strong agitation was launched in 1985. The workers' union agitated for house rent , medical facilities and wage hike and got them.

In 1998-99, there was an attempt to lock out the unit and then to go for privatisation. The workers launched agitation as well as performed their best to increase the production. It was for the first time that the workes did not stop work while agitating.

The major contribution of the steel plant workers' union was that there was unity among all the political shades. There was even Bandh observed by the nearby small twon Gajuwaka residents in support of steel workers. Later the workers not only succeeded in getting the plant back but also incentives and wages for the strike period. The union had also launched demand for incentive for production and got cash incentive.

INTUC was the first union in the plant and Rajshekhar was elected General Secretary in 1982, 1985 and 1993. He joined INTUC as his father and grandfather were both in the Congress. He had joined plant as anoffice assistant and refused further promotions.

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After graduation, I got involved in the movement of displaced families' shelter and compensation issues that came up in course of the construction of the steel plant. It was a movement jointly launched by AITUC and INTUC and continued from 1980 to 1988. Meanwhile I completed my studies attending night classes. Compensation was given for dry land Rs 1800 per acre and for wetland it was Rs 2000 per acre. Later among many agitators who got employment in the steel plant, I was also absorbed. There were 64 villages displaced with 15000 families as each child who had become 18-year-old, was considered a unit. Each family got one employment. For the rest of the family members, they were trying to get employment even through contractors and 500 were taken in. Additional compensation was given.

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