

INDIAN JOURNALIST UNION RESPONSE ON WAGE BOARD DEBATE

There is nothing new about the campaign of newspaper owners as published in Times of India dated June 2, 4 and 6 June 2011 against the awards of the Wage Boards for journalists and non-journalist employees even before they are notified by the Government. What is new – and ridiculous -- about their mischievous campaign is that they are projecting these awards as an instrument of the Government's attack on the freedom of the Press and the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression. The exercise is patently mischievous because it conceals the fact that the Wage Boards are not government committees but autonomous quasi-judicial bodies headed by a retired High Court or Supreme Court judge and including equal number of representatives of both employers and employees and a couple of independent members.

To project the Government's order notifying these awards as a stratagem to stifle the voice of newspapers and threaten their closure is preposterous since one of the major factors the boards consider in making their recommendations is the revenues of the various newspapers. That is why the boards classify the newspapers on the basis of their revenues and recommend different wage-scales, etc., for different classes of newspaper establishments. The newspapers falling in the highest class, who pay annual packages worth crores of rupees to their CEOs and other top officers, surely, shall not have to close down by paying judiciously fixed salaries to their employees. And the lower classes of newspapers, who are generously aided by the Union and various State governments through advertisements and other facilities, have never had to suffer so far because of the salaries fixed by the previous wage boards.

This incidentally is not the first time that newspaper owners are trying to usurp the right to freedom of the Press. Their earlier attempts, however, were thwarted soon after Independence when no less a person than Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru warned against such usurpation and made it clear that the right, in fact, was that of the journalists and not Press barons. The right to freedom of the Press cannot be reduced to a right of unscrupulous managements to publish advertisements as news by selling their columns for "paid news." It, therefore, has to be saved not only from government interference but also from newspaper managements, besides all kinds of anti-social elements, terrorists and the Mafioso. It is not the highly-paid top managements of newspapers but their journalist and other employees that bear the brunt of these attacks. Newspapers owners surely do know the number of fearless journalists who have fallen to bullets and knives in various parts of the country just for courageously carrying out their duty to report fearlessly.

The greatest threat to the freedom of the Press, in fact, comes from managements who grudge fair wages to their employees and want to keep them on tenterhooks by using the twin weapons of irregular and whimsical increments and job insecurity. They hate the institution of Wage Board only because it strengthens the morale of working journalists by regulating their wages while their job security is guaranteed by the Working Journalists Act.

The kind of freedom newspaper owners want is obvious from the sheer fact that while carrying in detail the views of their CEOs and the INS, they have refused to carry the viewpoint of the Confederation of Newspaper & News agencies Employees Organizations even as a letter to the editor. Such unchartered freedom is tiring indeed!

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