

Friends & Comrades,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this, the seventh, plenary session of the Indian Journalists Union, which is being held in what surely are extraordinary times, when restive peoples with democratic urges are agitating all around the globe. Suffering from the effects of the financial crisis caused by unregulated and uncontrolled operations of global finance capital, the middle classes in almost all the continents are fighting for respite from unemployment, violations of human rights and sheer loot by the unethical practitioners of crony capitalism. And interestingly, the very information technology (IT) that facilitates global wheeling-dealing by unscrupulous money spinners also helps mobilize the activists who fight in West Asia for democracy and an end to dictatorial regimes, or launch in Europe and the USA movements like “Occupy Wall Street (OWS)” protests to seek curbs against “loot” by financial markets. Why, didn’t our own country recently see millions on the streets to demand an end to corruption and the enactment of a strong anti-corruption law? Who does not know the role electronic and print media, as well as social networking, played in mobilizing those millions of people for the cause of Jan Lokpal Bill? And who can ignore the role of these media and social networking behind the Arab spring and OWS protests?

The past few years, friends, have seen big changes in the approach and attitude of various peoples to not only their democratic and human rights but even to the character of democracy. They are no longer satisfied with being ruled by a system that is democratic merely in form but are insisting increasingly on strengthening the democratic content in the system. And we certainly can take legitimate pride in the role the media have played in creating, nurturing and spreading this awakening.

It is also a matter of pride for our union that we, too, recently went through a democratic churning of sorts and successfully strengthened the democratic content in our union's working. Our alert comrades in the previous National Executive Committee and outgoing Secretary-General K. Sreenivas Reddy firmly fought down plans to scuttle democratic elections and perpetuate the continuation of certain office-bearers even if that had to be done by dictatorially throwing out the strongest State unions from the organisation. Thanks to the clear vision and alertness of these comrades, we have succeeded in maintaining our unity and holding free and fair elections to elect a new team of office-bearers. I greet you all on behalf of the newly-elected Secretary-General as well as my own and once again assure you of our firm commitment to strengthen further the democratic content in the union's working by ruling out the election of any office-bearer for more than two terms at a stretch. I am also happy to report in this context that the courts of both Andhra Pradesh and Delhi have dismissed as illegal and unauthorized the decisions of the outgoing IJU president to disaffiliate the Andhra and Tamil Nadu State unions and remove certain IJU office-bearers to carry out his designs to rig the IJU election.

It is also a happy augury that this session is being held only a few days after the Government of India has notified the Majithia Wage Board's recommendations, which have been challenged in the Supreme Court by the employers and their organisations. It is unfortunate that the Union Government unnecessarily delayed the notification of Wage Board recommendations, which gave the employers an opportunity to challenge the awards even before these were notified. In fact, it was only after a strong agitation by the IJU and other constituents of the Confederation of Newspaper and News Agency Employees Unions that the Government issued the required notifications. We are grateful indeed to the Hon'ble Supreme Court for its Order permitting the issuance of these notifications.

The notification of the awards, however, is only a partial victory. In fact, it is no more than paper victory, for its provisions now is subject to the final judgment of the Supreme Court in the case filed by the employers against the very concept and philosophy of not only the Wage Board but also the Working Journalists (Conditions of Service) Act. The employers, in fact, have been trying to circumvent the provisions of this law since long by employing one stratagem after another. They have been seeking to usurp the right to the freedom of the Press by seeking to deprive the journalists of their statutory rights to defined conditions of service and job security under the Working Journalists Act. They have been doing this by taking recourse to the contract system to deprive working journalists of their job security and statutorily fixed wages. These contracts, in fact, enforce upon the journalists service and working conditions that make them subservient to the whims and fancies of the employers and managers. It is this denigration of the status of journalists and the consequent dominance of the managements that is responsible for the phenomenon of “paid news” and other violations of the code of ethics in the profession and the industry.

The IJU has all along opposed the contract system because it is being employed by the Press barons to rob the journalists of almost all the rights and privileges we won after hard-fought struggles soon after Independence. Having succeeded so far in their designs to craftily deprive a large number of journalists of their rights under the Working Journalists Act, newspaper-owners have now launched a bolder attack on the community by seeking annulment of the Act and its statutory wage-fixation provisions. The objective of the employers obviously is to deprive the working journalists of the fruits of their past victories and to usurp their right to freedom of the Press. This must not be allowed to happen. And the onus for a determined struggle against this attack by the Press barons falls principally on the IJU since it is the largest,

strongest and most representative organisation of the country's working journalists. It has had no less than two nominees in the Press Council of India for over a decade. The present PCI, too, has two IJU nominees -- Comrades K. Amarnath of APUWJ and Arun Kumar of BUWJ -- as its members. In the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), too, the IJU has been the only Indian organisation to have had a representative in Ms. Sabina Inderjit on its Executive Committee. It is, therefore, the bounden duty of the IJU to rise to the occasion and lead the struggle against this latest attack of newspaper owners.

And let there be no mistake: the present attack by the owners is neither fortuitous nor intended merely to save some money. It is rather late in the day for them to attack the wage board philosophy because their nominees, too, were on these boards and duly participated in their functioning. These wage boards have been working and their awards being notified and implemented for decades. Why is it only now, when a large proportion of journalists have been covered by the contract system, that the owners have chosen to go for the kill? Had they really been conscientious opponents of the wage board philosophy, wouldn't they have mounted this attack long ago?

The reason for this attack now is that everybody has become wise to the power of the media throughout the world. The media is no longer confined to newspapers and news agencies, but expanded exponentially to include broadcast and electronic media, besides large-scale social networking through blogs, e-magazines, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and what have you. All recent middle class movements in the world, including the anti-corruption campaigns in the country, provide ample testimony to the power of these media. No wonder, therefore, that all elite classes are getting increasingly more interested in controlling whatever media they can. And no surprise that the country's TV media is so very upset over Press Council chairman Markandey Katju's proposal that

broadcast media, too, be brought under the regulatory jurisdiction of the Press or Media Council. Big business and industry, obviously, have high stakes in controlling the media, particularly in the present ruling political-economic dispensation.

The TV media's argument, voiced through former Supreme Court Chief Justice J.S. Verma, that their self-regulation has been working satisfactorily is patently weak for, as Mr. Justice Katju pointed out, even the most reputed of their news channels have a rather questionable record as the Niira Radia tapes showed. However, as you all know, the demand for fresh legislation to replace the Press Council by a Media Council to cover both the print and electronic media was made by the IJU and even the previous Press Council long before the ongoing Verma-Katju debate. The present debate does show, however, that the wide spread of the media's power has become far too overwhelming to be left unregulated, particularly when the media starts playing an activist partisan role in social and political movements. Our country since Independence has developed so far in a relatively orderly manner because of the sagacity and wisdom displayed by the titans who led its transition from the colonial set-up by trying to set up a welfare state. Let's try to continue along the same path by choosing the golden mean.

The influence and power the print, electronic and "social" media have come to wield, in fact, have created an entirely new situation in which all their stakeholders have to exercise utmost vigilance, restraint and responsibility. Not only that. There is also need that the roles of various stake-holders, including journalist and non-journalist employees, proprietors, managers, advertisers and general public as well as the state be well-defined. The growth of the various media, in fact, has been so fast and furious over the past couple of decades that they have not been able to develop even uniformly accepted norms of behaviour or standards of probity. Even the service and working conditions or the hours of

work are not uniformly fixed in the electronic and broadcast media. The IJU, therefore, is of the considered opinion that it is time the Government set up a Media Commission to study the current state of affairs in the media and recommend adequate legislative and other measures to define the roles of all their stakeholders and regulate their working conditions and work ethics. This would, of course, involve at the very minimum the extension of the jurisdiction of the WJA to cover all the employees of the broadcast and electronic media and the strengthening of the Act by abolishing the contract system and empowering the Wage Board machinery to consider the wage structure of all media employees.

Notwithstanding Justice Katju's poor opinion of the intellectual level of working journalists, comrades, it is they who risk their life and limb to investigate, interpret and report the everyday events of life and history as it unfolds. These creators of "instant literature" surely do not have the scholarly luxury to look for "quotations" in books and have to get these from the "hurly-burly" of real life for they can see and feel how the new information technology (IT) and consequent mobility has increased the pace of change from the industrial to the technological society and why it need not take India (or China, for that matter) as long as it took Europe to develop into a modern state.

It is they who face bullets from anti-social elements and countenance both state and anti-state violence from Mumbai to Manipur. It is martyrs like Jyotirmoy De who fight crime and expose the underworld. While paying our humble tribute to J. De and offering our condolences to the bereaved family, we also reiterate our demand for the enactment of a national law to provide adequate safety and protection to journalists and adequate compensation to their families in case of such tragedies. The Press Council has already taken up our demand in this respect and constituted a sub-committee under the convener-ship of Com Amarnath, one of our nominees in the Council.

The times ahead, friends, are a period of struggle. The IJU has always played a pivotal role in the struggle for the rights of working journalists. Newspaper owners and managements have renewed their attacks on us by seeking the undoing of the Working Journalists Act and wage board awards. They have already weakened us by resorting to mass dismissals of workmen from leading newspapers like the Hindustan Times and closing down institutions like Times of India press in Patna. Any failure to put up a bold and strong fight against the new attack will make all media the voice of big business and industry and make the freedom of the Press captive to the whims and interests of the newspaper barons. This must not be allowed to happen.

We owe it to our predecessors, the valiant fighters of the 1950s and 1960s who fought for the setting up, first, of the Press Commission and, then, the Press Council, as well as the enactment of the Working Journalists Act, to launch an uncompromising struggle for the abolition of the contract system, full implementation of the Wage Board awards, the setting up of a Media Commission and the enactment of a law to provide security and protection to working journalists.

The IJU, as the strongest organisation of working journalists, must play its vanguard role and lead upfront in this struggle. Let us take the initiative in uniting the print and broadcast journalists to put up a joint struggle for these demands along with other employees of both these industries and the active participants of social networks.

You have quite a heavy agenda before you, friends, but I am confident that you would be evolving effective ways to tackle all the problems facing the movement today. I am confident also that we shall build up a strong countrywide movement to challenge and defeat the latest attack of the employers.

Before I conclude, let me thank the Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ) for having made excellent arrangements to host this plenary session.

While wishing your deliberations success, let me again express my confidence in the IJU's will and capacity to play a vanguard role in building up unity of both the journalist and non-journalist employees of all media organisations and defeat the designs of the employers to usurp the freedom of the Press.

Thank you.

**LONG LIVE INDIAN JOURNALISTS UNION  
LONG LIVE MEDIA WORKERS UNITY**