True, we’re ‘up against the wall’, yet the evaluation boycott by Delhi University teachers must be called off NOW

Dear colleagues and friends,

Most of us would agree, I think, that Delhi University (DU), in it’s near century-long existence, has never been traumatised by shock after bigger shock, the way it has been over the past few years. Day after day, year in and year out, since 2009-10 at least, wave upon authoritarian wave has crashed against the foundations of this university, leaving our lives as teachers, students and non-teaching staff, shaken to the core. The hurriedly mixed mindless cocktail of semesterisation, Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP), Three Year Undergraduate Programme (TYUP), Choice Based Credit System (CBCS), and Academic Performance Indicators (API) scores forced down our throats, the galloping ad-hocism, the unending woes of pensioners, the spectre of the sale of colleges and universities on the open market in the garb of ‘autonomy’, and the return of the 13-point roster, have combined with the ABVP’s violent anti-intellectualism—from the time of their campaign against AK Ramanujan’s brilliant ‘300 Ramayanas…’ right down to the vicious attack on, and occupation of Ramjas College in February 2017--to push us to the very brink.

More and more jobs are on the line and livelihoods threatened. Deep insecurities and unrelenting anxieties regarding the present and the future, with all the attendant experiences of humiliation, un-freedom, inequality, gnawing feelings of a lack of self-worth and intolerable levels of stress have come to haunt thousands amongst us, especially ‘adhoc’ and ‘guest’ teachers. Stagnation at work, that in turn, is increasingly monitored, bureaucratized, quantified and voided of creativity and meaning appears to have become the new norm. Creeping alienation, loneliness, paranoia, suspicion and ‘othering’ among colleagues, seem to have become widespread dangers, depression, repressed violence and the weakening of bonds of solidarity, the invisible, and as yet, unacknowledged costs.

Our lives at work, for no fault of ours, stand seriously messed up. The promise and practice of social justice—in it’s widest possible sense—lies in tatters, while threats to bodily integrity, personal wellbeing, dignity and intimate relationships, stare us in the face. Each one of us is reeling from the blows inflicted by this counter-revolution in Higher Education, the economically and socially vulnerable amongst us, most of all.

There can be little doubt that today we stand to lose everything of academic worth, intellectual value, cultural richness and social inclusivity that have been painstakingly crafted into the lives of public universities—despite the limited goals for which they might have been initially established—through the
dedicated labour, creativity, critical thought, open imaginations and struggles of
generations of teachers, students and non-teaching staff, offering us in a few
cases, perhaps, just fleeting glimpses into what peoples’ universities could begin to
look like.

It is equally clear that in the face of the twin, though not always combined
aggression of commodification and a marauding fascist political culture, we also
stand to lose the crucible of democratic rights, civil liberties and practices of
social justice—precious legacies of hard fought political battles waged the world
over—without which neither creative pasts nor dreams of brighter futures could
have been made by us for our public universities.

II

There can be little doubt, in other words that teachers at DU are today, staring
into the abyss; that we are, as student leader Mark Rudd, quoting LeRoi Jones,
said in Columbia in 1968, ‘up against the wall...this is a stick-up!’ Things have,
infact, been so terrible at times, that the feet have felt like they have no ground to
stand on, the lungs that they have no breath left in them, the tongue like it
doesn’t know words anymore; no sparking in the brain, ghosts for eyes, no
lightning coursing through the body, the sense of a ‘dead man walking’. Yet,
precisely because things have been as bad as this, especially now and in the
recent past, it is a wonder that we have not gone down under, that we have
managed to survive, pull ourselves out of the depths of despair and despite all
odds, take control of our lives, in whatever measure possible.

There’s been no running to gurus and ashrams, meditation camps and wellness
centres promising individual salvation. Struggle alone has made this possible,
struggles by teachers and struggles by students, not only now, but since DU’s tryst
with tragedy began in 2009-10. We’ve lost, we’ve won; we’ve gone through ups
and downs, we’ve fought amongst ourselves. We’ve come out onto the streets
and for GBMs in the thousands. Sometimes, as has been the case over the last few
weeks, we’ve barely been a handful, 200/300 at most.

We’ve fought with sound and fury, with the flourish of rhetoric, with
sloganeering, poster-making, pamphleteering and oratory at their creative,
inspiring, powerful best, but we’ve also suffered descents of the same into
clichéd insipidity and exhausting boredom. We’ve sat on dharnas and hunger
strikes, struck work, held press conferences and campaigned in neighbourhoods,
colleges and at Metro stations. We’ve fought under the leadership of the Delhi
University Teachers’ Association (DUTA), but we’ve also fought at local levels in
visible and invisible, everyday ways. We’ve fought on our own, but we’ve also
sought to build wider solidarities. Students have supported us and we, them, all of
us together keeping alive the burning desire to read, write, think, speak and live
without fear, and in freedom, doing for emancipated ways of being and living at
DU, for liberty in precious spaces, including in the classroom, and for democracy, ‘what spring does to the cherry trees’.

It is this that has allowed the history of the last 9 years or so to become a history of struggle rather than remaining just a record of terrible things being done to us. And it is this struggle, with its disappointments, eccentricities, unexpected twists and turns, backstabbing, withdrawals and surges ahead, it's necessarily erratic, irregular, unpredictable motion—the way of all struggles—as much as it's moments of collective splendor, standing by and for each other, intense discussions, insightful analyses and the learning that comes from walking together even while not being in complete agreement, that has allowed us to keep our heads above water, to survive, to keep hope afloat and possibilities kicking, even as we seemed to lose a lot and gain just a little. I am certain that but for this, silence would have come to reign over DU, a long time ago.

III

It is remarkable that our struggles have kept gloom from enveloping DU, but what has transformed the remarkable into the magnificent as far as the history of the DU teachers’ movement, as also the recent history of student movements from the FTII and JNU right down to Ramjas are concerned, is, that even when forced to the brink, pushed against the wall, and teetering on the edge of an abyss, not only have they stood their ground, protesting and fighting back, but they have done so with spectacular popular mobilization, words, arguments, ideas, slogans and songs, in the finest traditions of active non-violent resistance.

As for the DUTA in particular, it is especially pertinent to remember, as our evaluation boycott enters it’s sixth week—which is unprecedented even in relation to other movements of protest and resistance—that while no mode of protest has been, or is anathema to the DUTA, it has been important for our union leaderships, even as they try to ensure that the mass of teachers remain actively committed to major agitation-related decisions and as many students, non-teaching staff and sections of civil society stand by us as possible, to be always prepared to reconsider courses of action, take a few steps back, if necessary, should a strike or a boycott threaten to cause irrevocable harm either to students or to teachers themselves and thereby, to the future of the entire teachers’ movement. It is truly splendid that the DUTA, thus far at least, has been able to fight it’s battles, that have meant a lot to teachers across the country, by striking this fine political balance.

Let us make no mistake. The DUTA’s political weight within the ranks of the teachers’ movement as a whole and vis-à-vis the state, derives hugely from it’s moral authority rooted in treading this thin line.

It speaks volumes for the alertness of DUTA activists of all hues that despite the
political games all of them continue to play, they have respected, either
instinctively or consciously, this particular code of political behavior. Break this
code or, for that matter, step onto the terrain of violent resistance—in word as
much as in deed—and you strike a mortal blow at the magnificent threads in the
history of DUTA politics. This cannot but weaken the teachers' movement as a
whole.

The evaluation boycott, a perfectly acceptable form of protest until recently, has
now begun to corrode and eat into our struggle, subtracting from, rather than
adding to it. We may or may not have achieved even a fraction of what we had
hoped for when we embarked upon the boycott, despite the valiant efforts of
DUTA activists, but it is clear that we've reached a point today, where if the
boycott continues, the harm done to the futures of students coming from all
kinds of backgrounds, harbouring a million dreams for themselves, but also
laboring under unknowable compulsions and unimaginable pressures, shall be
irrevocable.

As should be amply clear from all that has been stated at the outset, the working
conditions for teachers at DU are perhaps, as much a bagful of compulsions and
pressures, no less harrowing and frightening. The point, however, is not to
measure the enormity of the one against the other, but to pose the following
simple questions: are we willing to do just about anything to get our demands
met, reach our hallowed goals? Are we willing, in other words, to fight the
good fight and ride our way to victory by breaking the backs of students, who
far from being responsible for our predicament are, in fact, like us, victims of
the state of Higher Education in the country today, many having been until
recently, 'fellow-travelers'? Are we, who have been pushed to the brink,
willing to protest this situation by now forcing students to the brink, pushing
them up against the wall and doing to them what we are saying should never
have been done to us? Are we, who are demanding that Capital, State and
fascist mobs stop playing with our lives, going to resist this by playing in
turn, through our own political practice, with the lives of students, deciding
FOR them what should happen to their lives?

Finally, are we even half-way sure that with counter-revolution and possible
isolation, rather than an expanding empathetic political environment,
staring us in the face, we shall be able to prevent the fate of the most
vulnerable amongst our colleagues from becoming worse than it already is?
The fact that the calls for action programmes and General Body Meetings (GBMs)
during the period of this boycott have neither attracted any substantial measure
of teacher or student participation nor shown any signs that a '1968-like
revolutionary situation' (!) might obtain in the near future, provides an added
urgency to these questions.
It will be up to the General Body of teachers to decide upon the course that our struggle must take from this point on. As for me, I stand convinced that the evaluation boycott is, in the current moment, plain and simply wrong. There is no time to be lost. In tune with the finest strains from the history of DUTA agitations, it must be withdrawn at the earliest.

At the same time, given all that is at stake, it is incumbent upon all of us, drawing upon the rich traditions of multiple ways of active non-violent resistance, both visible and invisible, to resolve to not give up the fight, to keep trying to build solidarities within and beyond the boundaries of our university, and to continue to ‘educate, agitate and organise’, as much for all that has been worthwhile in our creative pasts as for the stuff of our dreams that is yet to be.

Any path other than this threatens to come strewn with regrets. The decision to call off the evaluation boycott, NOW, on the other hand, might still allow us, as Neruda wrote, to ‘come up winners’, even as we seem to ‘come up losers’.

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