

## Employees Observe BSNL Foundation Day as Black Day in Protest against 'Systematic Destruction'

The BSNL employees union said it is protesting since the future of the telecom provider and its employees is getting darker by the day.



The All Unions and Associations of BSNL (AUAB) observed the foundation day of the company on Thursday as a 'black day' in protests against the "systematic destruction" of the public sector telecom service. Twenty years ago today, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) was carved out as a separate company from the Department of Telecommunication.

The occasion of happiness, however, turned out to be of uncertainty and grief for the BSNL employees who have been working tirelessly for the revival of the public sector telecom service provider.

"Instead of celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> Foundation Day, it is only with a heavy heart that the employees of BSNL have decided to observe it as a Black Day. This decision has been taken, since the future of BSNL and its employees is getting darker by the passage of every single day," said Chandeshwar Singh, Chairman of AUAB, and P. Abhimanyu, Convener of AUAB, in a statement.

As the crisis in BSNL gets magnified each day, the future of the telecom service provider hangs with uncertainty. If we look back, both the Congress-led UPA governments and BJP-led NDA governments have failed to revive and strengthen the company. But, ever since the Modi government came to power, the prospect of BSNL's revival has only become bleaker.

The employees associations and unions in BSNL have been demanding the revival of the public sector company. They incessantly demanded implementation of 4G services and asset monetisation. The unions had also urged the government to take steps to ensure financial viability of the company for its revival. In fact, during 2000, the then Union Cabinet had given a written commitment to ensure the financial viability of BSNL.

Following a series of protests and demonstrations, on October 23, 2019, the central government had announced a revival package of Rs. 69,000 crore for BSNL and MTNL. Among other things, the package included allotment of 4G spectrum to BSNL, asset monetisation and extending of sovereign guarantee to enable the telco to raise funds from the market by issuing bonds.

But that revival package also focused on the voluntary retirement scheme of employees and 79,000 BSNL staff was retrenched in this regard. Many contractual workers have also been retrenched in the name of cutting down avoidable expenditure of the company. A later circular issued on September 1 directed all units to curtail expenditure on contract work force which resulted in retrenchment of around 20,000 workers engaged with the telecom firm through contractors.

And finally, the management had floated tenders for procurement of equipment for 4G services. But later it was cancelled in June this year by the government based on a complaint from the "Telecom Equipment and Services Promotional Council" (TEPC). The cancellation of tender is further delaying the launching of BSNL's 4G services. BSNL is already lagging four years behind the private operators in the 4G segment while all the private providers are set to launch the 5G services.

It has been almost six months since BSNL's 4G tender was cancelled "on the plea that its conditions had violated" the government's "Make in India" policy. However, the Government is still unable to identify an Indian manufacturer who has developed the 4G technology and is capable of providing an end to end solution to BSNL's 4G requirements. "It clearly shows that there is no indigenous manufacturer who can fulfil the requirements of BSNL, so far as 4G technology is concerned," said the statement of AUAB.

"When this is the reality, why did the government show extraordinary haste to cancel BSNL's tender? Certainly it smells fishy. The AUAB has no hesitation in stating that the lodging of the complaint by the so-called TEPC itself is stage-managed, with the ulterior motive to scuttle BSNL's launching of 4G service," the AUAB said. It further asked, "When Reliance Jio, Airtel and Vodafone Idea are installing world-class telecom equipments, procured from multinational vendors, why BSNL alone should be told to go on to test the unproven equipment of some domestic vendor? Is it not a well thought of plan to kill BSNL, which is already four years behind the private telecom companies in adopting 4G technology and is struggling to keep afloat?"

On Thursday, AUAB organised hunger strikes throughout the country. The protesting employees also wore black-badges and participated in lunch hour demonstrations.

\*\*\*