

Strike on June 26: BSNL employees say both promised revival & salaries haven't come

Will the Centre allow BSNL, a PSU, to procure 4G equipment from global players at a time when it is trying to push Make in India to counter Chinese aggression?

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New Delhi: Awaiting salaries and the implementation of the Centre's revival plan, an employees union at BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited) is set to go on a nationwide strike on June 26 to protest against the delay. BSNL Employees Union (BSNLEU), the main recognised union in BSNL, is organising a countrywide dharna programme on June 26, said P Abhimanyu, General Secretary of the union on Thursday. On October 23, the Central government had announced a Rs 69,000-crore revival package for BSNL and MTNL. Among other things, the package included the allotment of 4G spectrum to BSNL, asset monetisation and extending of sovereign guarantee to enable BSNL to raise funds from the market by issuing bonds.

However, eight months later, except for the implementation of VRS, no other assurance contained in the revival package has been implemented, said Abhimanyu. "The much-publicised steps, such as the launching of BSNL's 4G service, issuing of sovereign guarantee to BSNL for raising funds from the market, monetisation of assets, etc., are yet to see the light of the day... Under the above-mentioned circumstances, BSNLEU has been compelled to organise this dharna programme. BSNLEU will intensify the agitation if the government and the Management do not come forward to settle the issues without further delay," an official statement said.

'Vested interests have the blessing from govt to scuttle BSNL's 4G rollout'

BSNL is already lagging behind private operators by four years in rolling out its 4G service. And the first tender floated by BSNL in this regard has been held up in the wake of a complaint letter sent by TEPC (Telecom Equipment and Services Export Promotion Council) to DPPIIT, in which the former has alleged that the tender floated by BSNL favours global players over domestic manufacturers in violation of public procurement norms. "The Revival of BSNL is unimaginable, without it rolling out the 4G service. In such a situation, it is a matter of serious concern that all-out efforts are being taken by vested interests, to scuttle BSNL's 4G rollout," said Abhimanyu.

"It is most disturbing to note that, the vested interests, who are out to scuttle BSNL's 4G rollout, have the blessings of the government. Otherwise, the flimsy complaint given by the TEPC, could not have resulted in the holding up of BSNL's 4G tender," said the statement released by BSNLEU. The union demanded that the government give immediate clearance to BSNL to procure 4G equipments through the tender that has been floated without any delay.

Employees still waiting for salaries for May, contractual staff not paid for a year

"The payment of salary for the month of May has not been made, until this statement goes to the press. The contract workers in BSNL have not been paid wages for the past one year, as a result of which 12 contract workers have already committed suicide," said the statement. Sources who spoke to PSU Watch said that this is the second consecutive month when salaries have not been paid to employees on time. "Last month, salaries for April was released only after May 20. And again, this month, it's June 25 and we are still waiting for May salaries to be released," the source said.

"Various competitive examinations, for the promotion of the Non-Executive employees, have not been held for the past many years. The society dues and the LIC premium, deducted from the salary of the employees, have not been remitted to the concerned Organisations for the past one year. This has created serious problems to the employees. At a time when the employees are facing threat from the COVID-19, they are not getting cashless treatments, as has been assured in the BSNL's Medical Reimbursement Scheme (BSNLMRS)," the statement said.

India-China confrontation: Will govt allow BSNL to buy from global players?

One of the main issues raised by the trade unions and associations at BSNL in the past and even though this statement is that when BSNL's competitors are procuring world-class 4G equipment from experienced vendors having proven technology, why should BSNL alone be compelled to procure substandard equipment, manufactured by inexperienced vendors, in the name of "Make in India?" [PSU Watch had earlier reported](#) that Vodafone Idea had inked a Rs 14,000-crore contract with Chinese equipment makers Huawei and ZTE for new network equipment supply in 2018. The two Chinese equipment makers supply a large fraction of 4G equipment used by telcos in India.

However, in the backdrop of a confrontation between India and China, the government has been pushing Make in India with a lot of aggression to counter Chinese imports. In such a scenario, BSNL employee union's struggle to get the green signal to procure 4G equipment from global vendors will have many challenges to meet, beyond the TEPC letter. The crucial question that remains to be answered is will the Centre allow a state-run company to procure equipment from global players at a time when it is trying to push Make in India with urgency to tighten the noose around Chinese imports?