

## **BSNL: After Package Announcement, Centre's 'Revival' Push Hits the Buffers**

Eight months after the Centre announced a revival package, the plan is “yet to see the light of day,” the BSNL Employees Union (BSNLEU) has alleged.

**Ronak Chhabra** 19 Jun 2020

The much-extolled commitment of the Centre to revive state-owned telecommunication company Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and make it “profitable”, now rings hollow to its employees in the face of an undue delay in carrying out measures assured in a revival package.

The Rs 69,000 crore package, hailed as one to improve the fortunes of the debt-laden telecom operators, BSNL and MTNL, was announced in October last year. Eight months on, steps announced as part of the plan are “yet to see the light of day,” the BSNL Employees Union (BSNLEU) has alleged.

Demanding that the Narendra Modi-led Central Government takes “expeditious steps”, the employees’ body on Thursday served a notice to the company’s chairman and telecom secretary at the Department of Telecommunications (DOT), to organise a *dharna* on June 26.

The notice mentioned that social distancing rules will be maintained during the protests in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notably, this is not the first demonstration by employees, who demand that the Centre backs its words with actions. Employees had observed a one-day hunger strike in the month of February as well.

“We have written several letters and brought up the issue of delay (in implementing measures) in meetings and staged protests. However, the non-serious attitude of the BSNL management continues,” said Abhimanyu P., the General Secretary of BSNLEU.

“Their (Centre and DoT) intention is to weaken BSNL further; turn it into an entity like Air India and sell it,” he added.

Among the major revival measures announced by Union Minister for Communications, Ravi Shankar Prasad, was the launch of BSNL 4G’s service – a long pending demand of unions – a voluntary retirement

scheme (VRS), the issuing of sovereign guarantee and monetisation of BSNL's assets.

As of now, of these, only the VRS scheme was implemented, resulting in the trimming of as many as 79,000 employees from BSNL's workforce. The move was celebrated as a "good response" by Prasad in the Rajya Sabha.

However, Abhimanyu strikes a different note. "We don't call it 'voluntary retirement' but retrenchment. The Centre had laid the ground for that; salaries were delayed for months, the retirement age was threatened to be reduced. As a result, employees were 'forced' to retire since they uncertain about their future," he said.

While salaries for the month of May is still pending for the existing workforce, contractual employees have not been paid for the last one year.

As of today, BSNL's revival is not believed to be possible without an up gradation of its services to 4G technology – the spectrum for which was auctioned to private operators in 2016. BSNL was reportedly not allowed to participate in the bidding process back then.

"Time and again, the process of acquiring 4G has been delayed – even after it was assured in the revival package," Abhimanyu told *NewsClick*. BSNL's management had to cancel a tender for procuring 4G equipment in May this year following allegations of not giving preference to 'Make-In-India' products.

Industry body Telecom Equipment and Services Export Promotion Council (TEPC) had then reportedly complained against the state telecom operator for not following the rules.

At the time, BSNLEU wrote to PM Modi to intervene in the matter, saying that TEPC's complaints were "nothing but a ploy to stall the 4G equipment procurement and launching of 4G services by BSNL."

"When BSNL's competitors (Reliance Jio, Airtel and Vodafone Idea) are procuring world class 4G equipments from experienced vendors having proven technology, why should BSNL alone be compelled to procure substandard equipments, manufactured by inexperienced vendors, in the name of "Make in India" policy," the letter had said.

The government has always denied a "level playing ground" to BSNL; launching 4G services is the "acid test" of the government's assurances to revive the public company, Abhimanyu added.