

Revolutionary Role of Working Class

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In the text book history of India's freedom movement, the role played by the working class and other toiling sections of the masses was mostly ignored except some passing references. But working class played a revolutionary role in attaining India's freedom.

In the first decade of twentieth century, the working class of India had just begun to emerge and enter the arena of economic struggle, the struggles being limited to the new industrial centres only.

From the outset, the workers had to confront two basic antagonistic forces-imperialist political rule and economic exploitation by both national and foreign capitalists. Consequently, the trade union movement of India could not but be interlinked with the political movement for national liberation.

Only after the birth of its own political party and an alternative path to both national freedom and its own emancipation was chalked out, could the working class attempt to play an independent role, howsoever limited, in the national liberation struggle.

Working class came early on political issues when the first political strike was organised in Bombay in July 1908, protesting the arrest of Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

July 22 was the concluding day for Tilak's trial and he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment. The Bombay workers came out with a programme of action against this sentence, and decided on a six-day general strike against the six years of imprisonment for Tilak.

One lakh workers joined the political strike which began on July 23. From July 24 the encounters between the armed police and army-men started and a street battle ensued. The entire city reverberated with these pitched battles fought by thousands of workers.

MASS STRUGGLES DURING 1928-31

The working class of India began to play an increasingly important role in the freedom movement during the new phase of mass struggles in the period between 1928 and 1931.

The Indian National Congress never put labour on its economic or political agenda except for lending support to certain working-class economic struggles aimed mainly against the British capitalists.

Appearance of the working class in the battlefield as an independent social force, in part under Communist influence, in part outside of it, taking the initiative, lent the anti-imperialist struggle a new dimension.

The impact was felt in the stormy situation created by the workers' strike, mass demonstrations and militant youth and student movement against the Simon Commission.

The Bombay Municipal Workmen's Union took the lead in the protest against the Simon Commission, on February 3, 1928, the day the commission landed in India.

In fact it was a day of political strike by the working class to demonstrate their will to overthrow British imperialism.

Newspapers reported massive working class participation in all protest hartals, demonstrations and meetings that took place in Calcutta, Madras, Lahore, Lucknow, Delhi and other principal cities of India.

COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE DEMANDED

When at the Calcutta session in December 1928 Gandhiji moved a resolution on Dominion Status as recommended by the Nehru Committee and approved by the Working Committee, demanding its establishment by December 31, 1930, there was general uproar. In a bid to mollify the strong opposition, Gandhiji reduced the period of waiting from December 31, 1930 to the same date in 1929. Thus was the resolution on complete independence shelved.

It is against this background the far-reaching implications of the working class political initiative towards achieving full independence has to be understood.

The mammoth and unprecedented working class demonstration before Congress pandal during the Calcutta session demanding that the Congress adopted the resolution for complete independence was part of the programme. About 30,000 workers, belonging to several trade unions of Calcutta, Howrah and nearby areas, led by leaders like Muzaffar Ahmed, Bankim Mukherjee, Sibnath Banerjee and others—all communists and left nationalists—demonstrated in the streets of Calcutta with slogans like 'Workers of the World Unite', 'Long live an independent India Republic' and 'we have nothing to lose by our chains', before reaching the Congress pandal. Ignoring the resistance by the Congress volunteers, thousands of workers entered the pandal and held a meeting. Jawaharal Nehru had to preside and the following resolution was passed: "This mass meeting of the workers and peasants from all industries declare that we the workers and peasant of the land shall not rest content till complete independence is established and all exploitation from capitalism and imperialism ceases.... We do call upon the National Congress to keep that goal before them and organise the national forces for that purpose."

WORKING CLASS MILITANT ACTIONS

After the prevarication of 1927-28, at its Lahore session in December 1929, the Congress ultimately set the attainment of complete national independence, as its goal. But the question was: In what manner was this to be attained; through the non-violent path as envisaged by Gandhiji, or through a different path directly opposed to Gandhiji's scheme of things?

The Congress perhaps, did not properly realise the mass enthusiasm that the resolution for complete independence would evoke. In fact, the risings of the Indian people that began to break out in various parts of the country, far transcended what Gandhi and the National Congress had envisaged.

Gandhiji ultimately came out with his much-publicised Salt March to Dandi along with a select band of followers on April 6, 1930. A nervous government arrested him. But they were totally unprepared for the militant mass protest action against Gandhiji's arrest. An unnerved government resorted to cruel repressive measures on the masses

throughout the country.

SHOLAPUR EVENTS

On May 9, 1930, the working class of Sholapur rose in action. Grave rioting broke out and the police was attacked. Police chowks and the sessions court were burnt. The fury of the mass was such that some policemen were even murdered and burnt on public streets. The police fired twice on the mob. Four were killed and fourteen injured.

The civil administration in Sholapur collapsed and the workers and peasants kept the city under their control.

The Government proclaimed martial law and the city was given over to the charge of the military.

After a heroic week-long battle the resistance in Sholapur collapsed in the face of heavy military reinforcements. How many sons of the working class attained martyrdom in the battle of Sholapur is not yet known. These countless sons, it seems, are condemned to remain unknown as neither the official record nor the bourgeois historians ever bothered with their particulars.

The four accused of the Sholapur case—Dhun Shetty, Sarda, Shinde and Kurban Hussain were hanged in the early hours of January 12, 1931 at Yervada jail.

WORKING CLASS MILITANCY IN THE LAST PHASE

The war-time advance and achievements of the Indian working class movement will undoubtedly be regarded as a memorable phase in the history of the Indian labour movement. The defeat of fascism and the end of the war saw the emergence of the Indian working class as a highly organised, class-conscious and uncompromising fighting force against imperialism.

But when the British Government was busy in simultaneously adopting divisive tactics and taking advantage of the disunity and vacillations of the upper level leadership, the many at the bottom again burst out in an unprecedented upsurge. Defying death and indiscriminate firing by police and the troops, and carrying Congress, Muslim and Red Flags in some cases, thousands of workers, students and middle class people joined in stormy demonstrations in Calcutta, Bombay and other cities and industrial centres demanding India's freedom.

The ratings of the Royal India Navy, who were highly aggrieved in consequence of a long series of unremedied grievances rose in open revolt against the British regime. The Central Naval Strike Committee which was set up by the rebellious ratings appealed to the civilian masses to organise powerful strike and hartal in reply to the threat to crush the revolt.

At a time when the expressly critical situation demanded unstinted help and support from the forces of the national movement. Vallabhai Patel on behalf of the Congress and serving their class interests, refused not only their support but even opposed it. But the call of the Naval Strike Committee evoked an immediate response from the Communist Party and the trade unions of Bombay, and enthusiastic and angry support from their class brothers. On February 22, the working class and wide sections of the toiling masses of Bombay organised strike and hartal, facing indiscriminate police and military firing. In the struggle that raged for three days from February 21 to February 23, according to conservative official figures, 250 patriots sacrificed their precious lives at the brutal hand of the British Army which drove in lorry loads through the streets of Bombay indiscriminately firing their tommy guns. In Calcutta, Madras, Karachi and other places too popular demonstrations were held in support of the naval

ratings' struggle.

NEW CLASS ALIGNMENT

The events of this period 1945-46, clearly revealed the new alignment of class forces in the political arena of India. Defying communal conspiracies, the unity and cohesion of the entire working class, its inspired participation in the political mass struggles, together with the uncompromising resoluteness of the peasantry, the students and the middle-class elements, raised the tempo of the anti-imperialist struggle to a challenging and irreversible height.

Thus the political struggle for India's freedom followed contrasting paths: one followed by the enlightened and propertied class who were in the leadership of the national movement, and the other by the working class. The former constantly vacillated even on the question of adopting a clear line on the achievement of complete independence. The workers on the other hand, were not only clear in their line of political action, they also closely linked their economic demand with the political struggle for freedom. And they showed the deep understanding, and the courage that arises from it, that without the readiness to die, no goal can be achieved. It is on their sacrifice that we stand free to-day. And the lesson they imbibed and left behind still holds to-day.

(ABRIDGED. Courtesy : Employees' Forum)

AGAINST FRAUDULENT GOVT PENSION SCHEME MASSIVE PARLIAMENT MARCH OF WORKERS ALL INDIA STRIKE ON 17TH DECEMBER

Tens of thousands of workers from all parts of the country converged outside the Parliament, at Patel Chowk, New Delhi on 2nd September '97, in a mighty show of anger and protest against the imposition of a fraudulent Govt. Scheme on the workers in the name of Pension. The workers rally resolved to step up further protest actions culminating in a countrywide strike action on December 17.

The Parliament march and the massive rally took place at the call of four Central Trade Unions viz ; CITU, AICCTU, UTUC and UTUC(LS). But workers affiliated to other organisations, even of belonging to those supporting the Govt. Pension Scheme joined

the rally in a big way.

A major section of participants were from the low paid unorganised sector, who according to the supporters of the retrograde scheme were supposed to be benefited by the Govt. Scheme.

Thousands of beedi workers from Madhya Pradesh, UP, Karnataka and West Bengal, brick-klin workers from Haryana, contract workers from Bhilai, Raipur and Korba, construction workers from Punjab and the big contingent of unorganised sector workers from Delhi, Ghaziabad and Faridabad, joined the rally travelling all the way from distant corners of the country. They exposed clearly that the claim of