

WORKING CLASS AND 50 YEARS OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

M K Pandhe

Working class and the toiling millions in India will rejoice on the occasion of celebration of 50th Anniversary of India's independence. The ruling class will highlight only the role of some national leaders in throwing out imperialist yoke from the soil of India. The heroic role played by the working class will be obviously not focused during the official celebration.

It is, therefore, the duty of the trade union and democratic movement in India to explain to the working class of India this sacrifices made by the working class and the toiling masses of India in achieving independence for the country. However, the leadership of the national movement was in the hands of bourgeoisie which has resulted in their taking advantage of the gains of the freedom movement.

The working class struggle against imperialist exploitation started much before the commencement of the trade union movement in India. The harrowing working conditions prevalent in cotton textile mills in Bombay, Jute mills in West Bengal and tea plantation in Assam resulted in several spontaneous outbursts of the working class. Several unknown leaders of these outbursts were done to death by armed hirelings of the British owners with impunity. A slightest protest against exploitation was brutally suppressed by the police. The conditions in tea plantations in Assam and North Bengal was particularly very serious where many workers were shot dead and thrown in the river without any trace of the ghastly murder.

The revolt of indigo plantation workers and the peasants in Bengal was among the earliest actions by the toiling masses of India. There have been several peasants uprisings against landlordism in the last century which have shaken the rural support base of the British Raj.

The strike struggles have started in sixties of the last century. Several railway strikes have been recorded in that period. The strike of the Empress Mill workers in Nagpur in 1873 was among the major struggles fought by the workers in the early period.

The historic strike of Bombay textile workers for 3 days in the year 1908 in protest against the arrest of Lokmanya Tilak was a major political action by the Indian workers against imperialist domination. The struggles of workers in Tamil Nadu led by Chidambaram evokes repressive measures by the imperialist Government. Every activity to organise the workers in the battle against exploitation was considered as seditious by the British Government. Despite these repressive measures trade unions were being formed to ventilate the growing discontent of the working class.

The trade union and working class movement got a new fillip after the First World War when the rising prices of essential commodities went up very high and a new strike wave emerged all over India in major industrial centres. The formation of AITUC in 1920 was a moment of great importance. The election of Lala Lajpat Rai as President of AITUC was an indication of closeness between the trade union movement and the struggle for freedom.

The October Revolution in Russia in 1917 had a great impact on the Indian working class which has enthused greatly the working class movement and rise of socialist ideas emerged within working class. Younger generation started taking interest in socialist and communist ideology. Along with the freedom movement the concept of social revolution began to take roots in the country and working class movement got new revolutionary outlook.

The British rulers understood the importance of these early revolutionaries and tried to suppress these movements with ferocious repressive measures since this potential force was viewed as the major threat to the alien rule in India.

The role of these revolutionaries is not being focussed today on the occasion of our 50th Anniversary of independence. They do not underline that these revolutionaries tried to give a proper direction to the working class movement. To side track the public attention the bourgeois leaders characterised these movements as "foreign inspired." Despite this maligning campaign the socialist consciousness grew among the working class.

Instead of symbolic struggle against imperialists as advocated by the bourgeois leaders the emerging socialist forces stressed for mass struggle against imperialism and advocated complete independence. The British imperialists got scared with the emerging socialist movement in Bombay, Madras Presidency and Bengal and resorted to repressive measures to terrorise the people. During twenties the Kanpur conspiracy case (1924) and Meerut conspiracy case (1928) was launched by the imperialists to implicate leading functionaries in the working class movement and put them behind bars for several years. There was a countrywide movement demanding release of these prisoners. The Meerut conspiracy case even attracted international attention.

The terrorist movement in India had played a remarkable role in fighting against imperialist rule in India. The Martyrdom of Bhagat Singh and his colleagues is still fresh in the minds of the people. The heroic struggle of Chittagong Armory Raiders who valiantly challenged the imperialist in 1930 and the brutal suppression of their armed revolt by the British Army had roused strong anti-imperialist feelings all over the country.

The revolutionary role played by the Gaddar Party to mobilise support in India and abroad for the freedom struggle, the initiative taken to develop communist movement by Muzaffar Ahmad, M Singaravelu and others on the soil of India as well as by those in Tashkent, Germany, USA, etc must be remembered on this occasion.

The refusal of the Indian Army personnel to fire at peaceful demonstrations in Peshawar under the leadership of the Chadrasingh Garhwali and the punitive measures taken against the patriotic army men has contributed a great deal in rousing the anti-imperialist sentiments among the workers. The colleagues of Bhagat Singh and participants in Chittagong Armoury Raid later on joined the working class movement.

On the occasion of the Independence Day we cannot forget the immense contributions made by representative of the working class in UK like Ben Bradley who was also involved in Meerut conspiracy case by the imperialist Government. R P Dutt, a veteran communist leader of Great Britain by his several writings inspired the leadership and activists

of the working class movement in India. We must remember the solidarity expressed by these two comrades.

The radical movement in India in which working class played a significant role roused the consciousness of the masses which resulted in demanding complete independence by the Congress Party in 1930.

The workers uprising in Sholapur in 1930 which resulted in British administration police and army leaving the city for three days virtually ending the British Raj in the city and National flag being hoisted in most of the Government establishments was another landmark struggle during the freedom movement. With new Reinforcement by the army Martial Law was declared in the city killing large number of workers and patriotic people and detaining hundred with severe punishment by the Martial Law regime. 4 leaders were hanged by the British rulers. Nationalist leaders like Lokmanya Tilak, Gandhiji, Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose have no doubt played an important role in mobilising Indian masses in the anti-imperialist struggles. They have created impact on the working class movement and the positive contribution made by them should be remembered on the occasion of this great anniversary of India's independence. After all Lokmanya Tilak was nominated for the post of Vice President at the First Conference of AITUC which could not materialise due to his untimely death prior to the conference. Nehru and Subhash Bose were elected as President of the AITUC which also indicated importance of the TU movement in the national movement.

However, the bourgeois leaders were also attempting to underestimate the working class movement and did not like to develop it to acquire a leading role in the freedom movement. Their anti-imperialism had limitations which clearly reflected during all freedom movements and it was clearly visible on the eve of independence of the country in 1947. The growing capitalist class in the country was hostile to the working class movement since it was directed against the capitalist system itself. This explains why the working class strike actions on political issues was discouraged by the bourgeois leadership.

The formation of All India Kisan Sabha in 1934 heralded emergence of militant kisan movement which also participated in several anti-imperialist

struggles and against the imperialist agents in the rural areas the landlords. This movement also faced severe repression. In many princely states the kisan sabha has played a key role in fighting against feudal oppression during the freedom movement.

On the occasion of 50th Anniversary of our independence we must remember the heroic Kayyur Martyrs as well as the heroes of Punnappra Vayalar struggle in Kerala whose role in anti-imperialist struggle was of great significance in India. Working class and the toilers movement owe a great deal for the sacrifices of these revolutionaries.

The anti-war strike at a national level in 1939 was a notable anti-imperialist action by the militant working class movement. During the early part of the second world war a large number of trade union leaders were imprisoned along with the other freedom fighters under the Congress leadership.

However, the heroic role played by Soviet Union in defeating Fascist Germany and other axis powers had changed the world situation. In the post world war period India witnessed a powerful strike wave in which millions of workers participated. Though some of these struggles were on economic issues they also reflected anti-imperialist sentiments of the workers. Series of peasants struggle broke out during this period which clearly reflected the rising tide of militant mass movement against imperialism.

Working class and the peasantry in India along with other sections of the people resorted to sustained actions demanding release of INA leaders and soldiers. The students, youth and women's movement in India also played a notable role in this period.

The RIN (Royal Indian Navy) revolt in Feb 1946 was a culminating point of several post war struggles of the people. The working class fully supported the struggle of RIN heroes who showed remarkable patriotism in challenging alien rule. The 3 days strike by the Bombay working class and the blood shed by several martyrs evoked strong countrywide anti-imperialist sentiments. The imperialist Government realised that they could no more rule India in the wake of growing revolutionary movement. It is just not a coincidence that within 3 days of the RIN revolt the British Government announced a mission to negotiate with the bourgeois leaders the settlement on transfer of power. In this process they imposed

partition resulting in division of the country. Leadership of Congress and Muslim League came to a settlement with the imperialists.

India achieved Independence on 15th August 1947. The working class and the toiling masses celebrated it with great enthusiasm along with other patriotic masses. High hopes were raised in their minds.

The capitalist path adopted by the Congress Government in cooperation with the landlords has resulted in slow economic growth and poverty conditions for the vast majority of the people.

So long Soviet Union and other Socialist countries were helping India in its economic development, the Government of India was adopting a policy of self-reliance and strengthening of the public sector. However, after dismantling of socialism in these country the Govt of India accepted IMF-World Bank conditionalities for loans and adopted the structural adjustment programme. This has resulted in giving up the path of self-reliance and resorting to privatisation and free entry to multinational corporations in the country.

The national sovereignty and integrity is today under great threat. The multinationals are capturing Indian market causing sickness in Indian industry making them non-competitive in Indian market itself.

The tremendous sacrifices made by innumerable freedom fighters who shed their blood for national independence and suffered long term imprisonment are greatly being undermined. The corrupt bourgeois elements are minting money at the cost of common man's livelihood. The growing unemployment and high prices are making the life of people miserable. Communalists, casteist and divisive forces are taking advantage of the situation to create threat to national unity and integrity.

The working class and other toiling masses must rally together to resist the threat and reverse the process accepted by the bourgeois landlord government. On the occasion of 50th Anniversary let us take a firm pledge to fight all these forces who are out to destroy the achievements of the freedom movement and posed a severe threat to sovereignty. The leading role of the working class in this crucial struggle will alone change the destiny of the country and carry forward the heroic traditions developed by millions of freedom fighters in the national liberation struggle.