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WORKING CLASS OF INDIA

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WORKING CLASS OF INDIA

HISTORY OF EMERGENCE AND MOVEMENT

1830-1970

SUKOMAL SEN

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TO
THE SUFFERING BUT FIGHTING
MILLIONS OF INDIA



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PREFACE

To write on the emergence and movement of the Indian working class has been a great deal more difficult than I had expected as the subject is not merely a history in the conventional sense.

The working class of India, as of everywhere else, emerged as concomitant circumstances of the capitalist society, but in the course of history the growth of the working-class movement as an economic and political force has presented itself as the antidote to the same very capitalist order. This book is therefore, I venture to say, simply not a history of the trade union movement of India in the hide-bound traditional manner, rather in a wider national and international context it has been sought to thoroughly deal with in this book the interaction of politics and economics in the struggle of the working class of India, the class which by now has grown not only in number but also in its political importance.

The emergence of the Indian working class took place at a period when India fell under the absolute domination of a colonial rule. The emergence had therefore its own problems and peculiarities as are not generally found in the growth of the working class of a metropolitan country. And since the birth, the working class of India had to confront two basic antagonistic forces—an imperialist political rule and economic exploitation both by the native and foreign capitalist classes. Consequently, the trade union movement of India became intertwined with the political movement for national liberation and thus an attempt has been made in this book to place the working men's struggle in the right perspective of the people's political struggle for emancipation of the country from the yoke of British imperialism, while trying at the same time to separate the threads and trends of such intertwining of the two struggles.

The dynamics of this intertwining continued till the achievement of political independence in August 1947 and since then a new phase with a higher perspective began in the course of the working-class struggles of India. The main trends of this

phase have been dealt with in a broad outline covering the period from 1947 to 1970.

This work thus sets out to sum up the social and economic processes providing the background of the birth of the Indian working class and its subsequent onward march giving a comprehensive outline and synthesis of available knowledge; above all it is intended to be a balanced account in which equal importance is given to the documentary evidences and their interpretation as well. Some of the interpretations of facts and events may, however, appear as outright departure from the flippantly easy and conventional notions and in certain cases those may even appear as defiantly iconoclastic, yet without pretension to authority, I would humbly submit that while making conclusions and interpretations I have tried utmost not to veer away to the slightest degree from the documented facts.

While preparing this study I tried to depend mostly on primary sources, but in certain cases I selectively drew from the secondary sources as well.

I am specially indebted to the staff of the National Archives at New Delhi; National Library, West Bengal Government Archives and Bangiya Sahitya Parishad at Calcutta and to a number of friends and organizations for their best co-operation in collecting necessary information and material. I also express my gratitude to a few more friends who have generously assisted me in typing the manuscript and in various other ways in the matter of publication of this book.

As a worker in the Indian trade union movement, I will consider my attempt fruitful, if this book is received with a certain measure of approbation by those who will take interest in reading it.

May 1, 1977
Calcutta

SUKOMAL SEN

CONTENTS

Preface

1	International Background	...	...	1
2	Disintegration of Traditional Indian Economy	...		15
3	Development of Capitalist Economy in India and Emergence of the Working Class	...	...	22
4	Advance of Industrialization and Conditions of Working Class	...	...	35
5	Emigrant Indian Labour and Plantation Labour			52
6	Beginning of Working-Class Movement 1850-1900			70
7	Preparatory Phase for Organized Trade Union Movement 1900-14	...	...	90
8	First World War—Political Awakening of Work- ing Class and Development of Organized Trade Union Movement 1914-20	...	...	119
9	Foundation of the All India Trade Union Con- gress 1920	...	...	161
10	Second Session of the All India Trade Union Congress 1921	...	...	184
11	First Appearance of Marxian Thought in India and Consolidation of the World Proletariat	...		192
12	Economic Recession: Defensive Struggle of the Working Class 1922-26	...	...	205
13	Sharpening and Extension of Struggle 1926-29	...		232
14	Organizational Split and Imperialist Onslaught 1929-31	...	...	279
15	Struggles during World Economic Crisis 1931-36			317
16	Sharp Struggles during Provincial Autonomy and on the Eve of War 1937-39	...	...	354
17	Eventful Course of Working-Class Struggles during World War II 1939-45	...	...	372

18	Last Phase of National Struggle and the Indian Working Class 1945-47	...	...	399
19	Trade Unions of Government and other White Collar Employees	...	...	414
20	Working Class in the New Perspective 1947 Onwards	...	...	433
	Index	...	...	459

INTERNATIONAL BACKGROUND

MODERN working-class movement is a product of Industrial Revolution. When Industrial Revolution with its centre in England was soon spreading into the continent, India fell under colonial rule. So instead of witnessing an Industrial Revolution on her own soil, India served as a colonial appendage of metropolitan England, quickening the process of Industrial Revolution in the master-country and at the same time suffering a forced disintegration of her own traditional economic order. Development of capitalism in India was therefore a very tortuous and much belated process. Indian working-class movement too consequently developed at a much later stage. The investigation into the Indian working-class movement therefore fairly warrants a brief look into the genesis of the working-class movement in Europe, its main trends and its organizational and ideological evolution.

Development of capitalism, so to say, a change-over from the old feudal economic order to the modern capitalist economy was a long drawn-out process starting from the mid sixteenth century. In the course of this evolution spreading over a period of about two hundred years right from the mid sixteenth to the last third of the eighteenth century, the characteristic form of capitalist production was manufacture. In the era before manufacture also, the workers depended on selling their labour-power, but they still had the real chance of eventually becoming independent. But manufacture involved extensive division of labour between many workers concentrated under one roof. The social division of labour and specialization of functions led to the downgrading and subordination of the individual who became a completely isolated component, cut off from the process of production as a whole and subjected to rigorous discipline. All

that the worker required was a highly specialized dexterity losing his general skill as a craftsman and his ability for independent work. The products of seasoned craftsmanship in the era before manufacture transformed itself into the products of 'collective labour' of a few skilled and many unskilled workers in the era of manufacture. The Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century only carried this process to its logical conclusion. It was a transition from manual labour in craftsmanship and manufactory to the use of machinery in large-scale industry. However, it was characterized not only by the invention and introduction of machinery, but also by the appearance of new basic classes—the bourgeoisie who owned the factories and the means of production and exploited the workers, and the proletariat, *i.e.* the wage-laboures who did not possess the means of production.

Amongst the European countries England was the first to witness this Industrial Revolution. The reasons are, in the main, two-fold. Firstly, it is in England where the capitalist class could lead the first successful struggle against feudalism and had been able to free itself from its shackles. Secondly, the wealth exploited from India and other colonies by the British colonialists formed a substantial part of the capital that was necessary for building capitalist industry in England. After the battle of Plassey in 1757 England was, in fact, flooded with India's enormous wealth.

In Britain, the forceful struggle between the old society and the new reached its culmination in the Revolution of 1640. The immediate cause of outbreak of the civil war between the King and the Parliament was an attempt to impose taxes. In this struggle, the Parliamentary cause had whole-hearted support from capitalists connected with industry. But the basic cause that did underlie this struggle was who should hold State-power, the rising capitalist class or the old feudal ruling class and those who mustered around the King. The former eventually came out victorious and succeeded in getting into the State-power.

Right at this moment, scientific inventions one after another heralded the Industrial Revolution. Machinery first appeared in the cotton industry. Thus beginning with the invention of Hargreaves' spinning-jenny in 1765, it advanced through James

Watt's steam-engine, Richard Arkwright and Samuel Crompton's device of textile machinery, Eli Whitney's cotton-gin, Fulton's steamboat and some such technical devices. These revolutionary inventions were followed by a very rapid growth and expansion of the coal, iron, and textile industries, as well as the railroads and laid the technical basis of Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution had therefore two aspects—the technical, *i.e.*, the invention and introduction of machinery, and the social, *i.e.*, the passing away of the old feudal order and the formation of new basic social classes—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the newly emerging capitalist economic order.

But in this continuously expanding revolution with the machine as the starting-point, the human organ was superseded by mechanical organization, independent of the limitations of human power. This totally transformed the whole production process. At the beginning of this process, in manufacture the organization of social labour was purely subjective in the sense that it required a combination of different operations, but the new modern industry had in machinery a purely objective productive organism which converted the labour into a mere appendage of an already existing material condition of production.

The consequences were disastrous. As concomitant circumstances of capitalism, the workers had to plod through an inhuman material condition. Doing away with the necessity to have either particular physical strength or hard-won practical skill to do most of the work in the new productive process, brought with it a drastic increase in female and child labour. This phenomenon indicated a calamitous effect on the physical and mental well-being of the common masses. The triumph of the machine over the man became synonymous with the insatiable greed of the capitalists for maximum profits and led to the lengthening of the working day and intensification of labour simultaneous with miserably low wages.

Although Trade Unionism as a national movement was a product of Industrial Revolution and in England Trade Unions began to take form as early as 1752,¹ long before this, combination of the employed had become a familiar feature of the English life. But in the early period of manufacture, despite

the conflicting interest between the workers and the capitalists, the workers tolerated this system. This was particularly true of the peasants, who deprived of their existence on the land by powerful landlords found in the new industries an alternative livelihood. But soon this ephemeral passivity gave place to ever-sharpening conflicts. Sporadic and usually short-lived, combinations had appeared from an early date, some even in the Middle Ages. And by the eighteenth century they were becoming more numerous, stable, and effective at any rate among the skilled artisans in a number of labour crafts. At the initial stage of the growth of capitalist enterprise prior to the establishment of large-scale modern industry, in many of the skilled trades it became harder for the apprentice to eventually become master. So the journeymen, conscious of the fact that they had no hope for advancement, used their Trade clubs more and more as Trade unions to defend or better their conditions. In the woollen industry where the merchant capitalists reduced the weaver to the status of a wage-earner under the domestic system, combinations of workers appeared to secure better conditions. In large-scale enterprises, however, the combinations were comparatively little. The miners had no permanent organization in any of the coalfields. In the engineering and iron industries trade unions developed among the specialist workers, but not among the less skilled. The Trade clubs of the urban artisans actually grew stronger as the demand for skilled labour rose in consequence of the general advance of production.

In the antagonistic relationship between these two social classes the law has intervened in favour of the employer right from medieval times. The Ordinance of Labourers was enacted in 1349 to fix the wages of workmen in certain crafts at levels that existed before the Black Death had decimated the working population. By 1640 the arbitrary system of wage-fixing by the justices was extended to all workmen. Since the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers there had been a tradition that the State should regulate labour conditions. The weaver or artisan who had a grievance could appeal to Parliament or to the law for help against low wages, long working hours, truck payments or the non-observance of the apprenticeship regulations of the Elizabethan Statute. Initially, Parliament sometimes considered the workers' case and granted a few of their claims but,

simultaneously limited their right to combine in future. Soon the policy of Parliament changed. The masters argued that the regulations, which in fact were never seriously meant for safeguarding the interest of the workers, were unnecessary and harmful and this appeal carried more weight than the labourers' appeal for protection. Trade after trade was 'freed' from restrictions.

In fact, by the end of the Middle ages, legislations combined with liberal ideologies based on a static concept of natural law had deprived the workers of the right to determine their own work and life by united action. This tendency did not confine itself in England alone. It had shown itself in France, Germany and other Western countries as well. In 1731 the Imperial Order of the Guilds, following virtually every European State, imposed a ban by a common law on apprentice unions throughout the Holy Roman Empire. The protagonists of medieval natural law and the classic liberal economists propagated that freedom and equality were best secured by guaranteeing the property relations of, and private competition between, numerous small producers. With this object they pleaded prohibiting the association of 'particular interest groups' whose power, they feared, would only limit the freedom of others. The bourgeois revolutions sweeping Europe did, however, nothing to change this. The workers too remained prisoners of such ideas as long as they continued to regard themselves as inferior 'plebians'. But the workers and the revolutionary intelligentsia soon realized that they could only regain their own rights by demanding equal political rights for all and thus prevent the State being abused in the interests of a minority. That is why the working class and revolutionary intelligentsia were the chief defendants of the French Revolution outside France and the English workers provided the social basis for the ideology of international solidarity in the struggle for democracy and human rights in defence of the Revolution.

In Britain the State growing more and more panicky at the prospect of workers' combination and resistance and particularly after a crop of strikes during the Anglo-French War in the last decade of the eighteenth century and gripped by the general fear of the working class aroused by the French Revolution of 1789, passed Combination Acts, 1799-1800. Those Acts supplemented

by the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794 completely annulled the right to form trade unions.

But these Combination Acts of 1799-1800 should not, however, be construed as an introduction of new principle banning combinations. It was, in fact, the culmination of a series of Combination Acts passed by the Parliament beginning right from the 1548 Bill of Conspiracies of Victuallers and Craftsmen—a general statute against such combinations to raise wage or reduce working hours. The primary purpose of the latest Acts was to make prosecution simpler by applying the procedure of summary jurisdiction in the ordinary magistrates' courts.

Social history shows that the strife between the capitalist and the wage-labourer dates back to the very origin of capital. It raged on throughout the whole manufacturing period. Since the introduction of machinery, the machine—the instrument of labour appeared to the workmen as the material embodiment of capital. It was therefore hardly surprising that the workers' immediate reaction was to destroy the machines. And so, seventeenth-century Europe experienced revolts of the workers against ribbon and lace-rooms. About 1630, a wind-sawmill, erected near London by a Dutchman was destroyed by the people. In 1758 Everet erected the first wool-shearing machine driven by water-power, but it was immediately set on fire by the million people who had been thrown out of work. Fifty thousand workers, who had previously lived by carding wool, petitioned Parliament against Arkwright's scribbling mills and carding engines.²

The workers repeatedly petitioned Parliament for the outlawing of machines but Parliament responded by passing law threatening anybody guilty of destroying factories or machine-breaking with capital punishment. Despite this law, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, machine-breaking by mass of the workers grew more violent, both accompanying strike action and independently. But these had remained so far as isolated and symbolical acts of terrorism, while the Luddites alone carried out a systematic campaign of machine-wrecking. In the period up to 1815 there were three Luddite movements—in the Midlands, in Yorkshire, and in Lancashire and Cheshire.³ The government despite Byron's outspoken opposition in the House of Lords in 1812, fell back on legislation making

machine-breaking a capital offence. In 1813, eighteen workers from Yorkshire were executed.⁴ The revolt was finally suppressed by terror. As time passed by, the workers' initial impulse gave place to conscious behaviour and they could find their real target of attack in place of the illusory one. In Marx's words, 'It took both time and experience before the work people learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and to direct their attacks, not against the material instruments of production, but against the mode in which they are used.'⁵

Machine-breaking, however, again flickered into life in the second half of the nineteenth century as in the case of the Sheffield file cutters in 1865 and also appeared in other countries at a corresponding level of industrialization—for example, the uprising of the Lyons Silk Workers in 1831 and of Silesian weavers in 1844.

Machine-wrecking and Luddism assumed a massive form and made a vivid story, but, as far as its methods were concerned, it lay outside the main currents of the development of Trade Unionism.

Trade unionism was faced with many difficulties in the years that followed the Anglo-French wars. The refusal of many employers to recognize the principle of collective bargaining led to frequent riots in times of strike action, to the defeat and persecution of the workers and the temporary break-up of their organizations. Despite this bewilderment in trade union activities, the French Revolution of the preceding century held out promises for the future development of the European working class and evoked an awareness of the necessity for both political democracy and international solidarity in the struggle for human rights. Industrialism spread swiftly through France and Germany. The increase in economic power of the ascendant bourgeoisie and the added importance of the expanding number of industrial workers could not fail to bear out its political consequences. Victory of conservative reaction over France forced the rising bourgeoisie into an alliance with the workers as its fighting auxiliaries and this political context contributed to the development of political consciousness of the working class.

The struggle for political power between the self-confident

English industrial bourgeoisie having a much stronger economic base and the landowning reaction vindicated wider democratic potentialities. This provided the English working class with a favourable background for resuming reform movement. The English working class raised their first social and political demands in the mass demonstration of Peterloo on August 16, 1819. Although this entirely peaceful demonstration was broken up by a deliberate massacre and the government set determined to kill the working class reform movement at any cost, this event marked a new phase in the struggle of the English working class.

The prevailing balance of forces amongst different social classes and the overt contradictions within the ruling political and economic groups led to the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824 and this was soon followed by the foundation of a number of trade unions, including coming into open of many which had previously existed underground or under the guise of Friendly Societies. The workers, freed from legal restraint, turned to trade union organization to improve their conditions. The suppressed feelings of the workers spurted out in a series of strikes and industrial unrest involving rioting and bloodshed.

The National Association for the Protection of Labour established in 1830 attempted to bring unions together and unite the workers so that they could successfully encounter the employers and win concessions from them. Robert Owen planned producers' co-operative societies aiming to dispense with employers altogether by organizing the production and distribution of all goods and services. With this object, in a special conference of trade union delegates in London in 1834, he founded the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. With spectacular recruitment to Grand National, Owenism—hitherto philanthropic and reformist—had become one of the chief theoretical pillars of the working-class movement. Despite complete deception of the workers of their political rights by a new upper-class compromise in the form of the 1832 Reform Bill, the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the landowning aristocracy over electoral reform and the use of the working class as an ally by the former played a conducive role to push forward the co-operative and trade union movement. This created inspiration for the working class to finally join the struggle for political

democracy and the transformation of society, though illusory, in the spirit of co-operative socialism. Although Owen never thought in terms of class struggle, in reality, increasing trade union activity provoked determined attack by the State and vigorous counter-measures by the entrepreneurs. This culminated in the collapse of the Grand National Union and quick decline of Owen's influence and his co-operative ideology.

The hitherto gathered experience of the workers led them to gradually realize the impossibility of achieving any lasting advances with actions limited to economic demands only. So, in the next phase of the English working-class movement democratic franchise once again became the focal point. The London Working Men's Association was founded in 1836 and the following year the Association upon the initiative of William Lovett and others drew up the People's Charter, a programme of six demands for political reform. This Charter rapidly became a general rallying point for the forces of discontent and in a huge meeting held in August 1838 at Newhall Hill, Birmingham, the leaders of various groups came together and agreed to merge their isolated agitations in a united campaign for the Charter. The six demands incorporated in the Charter comprised universal suffrage at twentyone years of age, vote by secret ballot, no property qualifications for members of Parliament, payment of members, equal constituencies and annual Parliament. The demands taken together aimed at democratization of franchise and ensuring fairness of representation to Parliament—in other words, the complete transformation of England into a democracy. Coming as it did in a period of grave economic crisis and mass unemployment, the call for the Charter fired the imagination of the English working class and the signatures collected amounted to an amazing total of over three million.

The Chartists' mass petition being cynically rejected by the reactionary Parliament, the agitation burst forth in the form of mass strike and insurrection. Although disagreement between two opposing groups in the leadership of the Chartists, the Moral Force Party favouring long-term agitation in collaboration with bourgeois liberals and the Physical Force Party considering mass strike as the decisive weapon, hindered to some extent the united action of the workers, the sweep and strength

of the movement eventually forced Parliament to make some social concessions.

The movement continued for about ten years, yet inexperience of the working class both in respect of organization and movement failed to bring about a successful end of the movement in so far as the basic demands were concerned. The last wave of great demonstrations of the Chartists in April 1848 met with failure, the Continental Revolutions of the same years were also defeated and this marked the end of Chartism.

Despite glaring weaknesses, the great Chartist movement not only succeeded in radicalizing the entire working class of England, it bore immense significance for and immeasurably influenced the course of world working-class movement as well. Within a generation, however, the English working class witnessed the statutory application of virtually all the famous six points of the Charter. Even the Ten Hour working day which had been the economic aim of the trade unions and Chartists for years came to partial fruition at least through a law in 1847 limiting the working day to ten hours for women and child labour. In practical effect, the ten-hour working day was enforced for men also in certain cases. The historical significance of the achievement of the ten-hour working day was sharply pointed out by Marx. 'The creation of a normal working day' he remarked, 'is, therefore, the product of a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working class.' Further, 'The English factory workers were the champions, not only of the English, but of the modern working class generally, as their theorists were the first to throw down the gauntlet to the theory of Capital⁶—so were Marx's compliments to the English working class.

The Chartist movement was also the maiden attempt of the working class to build a broad national party of their own class with unambiguous demands for full political rights. It was thereby one of the most significant and glorious movements in the history of world labour. As Lenin aptly put it, 'England was giving the world the first broad, truly mass and politically clear-cut proletarian revolutionary movement.'⁷

Faced with terrible exploitation, the British workers not only fought for amelioration of their wretched condition, they also began to realize the inherent evils of the capitalist system

itself and launched offensive against it. With real ingenuity, the celebrated Chartist leader, James Bronterre O' Brien developed a pretty clear understanding of the class struggle and the nature of the capitalist State. This he did fifteen years before Karl Marx drew up Communist Manifesto, and though there was much confusion and utopianism in O' Brien's writings he came remarkably close to Marx's analysis of class struggle.

Inhuman capitalist exploitation also sparked off protest and criticism in certain elements within the ranks of the capitalist and middle class themselves. Manifestations of these protests were to be witnessed in various types of utopian socialism that arose during the period. Along with Robert Owen (1771-1858) in Great Britain, Claude H. Saint—Simon (1760-1825), Charles F. M. Fourier (1772-1837), and Etienne Cabet (1788-1856) in France were among the most eminent of the utopian socialists. As was found with Robert Owen, the utopians instead of basing themselves upon the scientific laws of social development, worked out idealistic plans of society of their own imagination.

Wilhelm Weitling, a journeyman tailor of Germany, basically attacked the capitalist system and elaborated some sort of communism. German immigrant workers in London formed Exiles' League (1834-1836) and the Federation of the Just (1836-1839) and Wilhelm Weitling was a leader of the latter organization.

Likewise in the United States, Thomas Skidmore, a machinist, assailed capitalism and called upon the workers to challenge this system.

The utopian process of probing continued followed by setting up of co-operative colonies in the pattern set by Owen. Followers of Fourier and outstanding personalities like Horace Greely, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Russell Lowell and many other men of eminence devoted themselves to such idealistic ventures. But all these petty bourgeois panacea evidently failed to cure the ills of capitalism. With the development of scientific socialism by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and appearance of the First International on the scene of history, the utopian movements, however, came to an end.

Besides these utopian ideas, history witnessed the development of several other social trends of major importance

including pure and simple trade unionism, Blanquism, Proudhonism, Lassalleism and Bakuninism until the greatest achievement of the working class embodied in the revolutionary theory of Marxian Socialism.

While slowly and through many contradictions was the working-class movement able to develop an independence of thought and a scientific theory to overcome the harsh deterioration in living conditions in capitalist economy, the practical development of trade unions in the nineteenth century took place in the context of a running battle between the working class and the new governing classes including the legislature and judiciary. During this period industry was organized into factories and trade unions had developed patterns of collective bargaining with the employers. In England the industrial workers obtained the right to vote through the Representation of the People Acts of 1867 and 1884. And in 1868 the Trade Union Congress, a central organization of the English working class was formed. The Trade Union Act, called the 'Charter of Trade Unions' was passed in 1871 following the report of a Royal Commission on Trade Unions appointed in 1867. Together with a number of amending Acts, it achieved great advances for trade unions. Their objects were no longer considered criminal.

The political context for these legal reforms was provided by returning to Parliament for the first time of two candidates representing workers and the defeat of Gladstone's government followed by assuming power by the Tories under Disraeli. Thus after years of struggle, trade unions won legal recognition and were granted freedom of collective bargaining with the employers.

The defeat of the Continental Revolution of 1848 more or less totally excluded the bourgeoisie from a share in political power. France was ruled by the army, bureaucracy and police of Napoleon III and the States of German Confederation were each under the control of a different collection of princes, feudal aristocrats, and bureaucrats. After the Revolution its leaders had been executed, imprisoned or exiled. The continental working class was no longer capable of independent action. Only in England were the trade unions able to preserve a modicum

of organizational continuity which in the 1860s acquired speed and strength.

Quite naturally, England possessing the largest and best developed working class and being the first to give birth to trade unionism, became the scene of most of the preliminary efforts of the proletariat at international solidarity and organization. The capitalist system is international, so also the working-class movement. In the historical process, the proletarian class consciousness is destined to surmount all national borders. Even the Chartist movement displayed significant international traits. Since then a number of remarkable international movements with varying character radiated from England.

Meanwhile, new economic crisis reawoke the French and German working class giving rise to a movement politically and socially stronger than before. Despite anti-combination laws, wave of strikes broke out in France against wage-cuts. There, too, powerful internationalist tendencies manifested themselves among the workers. In fact, the French working class had strong international traditions, running back to Babeuf, the noted revolutionary in the Great French Revolution of 1789.

Various efforts at international groupings of the proletariat came to a fruitful culmination in the year 1864. The first meeting of the representatives of the working class of different countries was held on 28 September 1864 in St. Martin's Hall, London. Besides the English and the French, many *émigré* groups were represented, the Italians by one of Garibaldi's aides, the Germans by members of the Communist Workers' Educational Society. Karl Marx was in attendance and he was elected as one of the German members on the Central Committee. The Central Committee in its meeting early in October adopted the title of 'International Workingmen's Association' and elected office-bearers.

In drafting the statutes and formulating the political programme of the new organization, Marx was able to establish his views over those of the Owenites and the followers of Mazzini. *The Communist Manifesto* which came out as early as 1848 already concretized the essence of the political and social theories of Karl Marx. It was a splendid achievement for Marx having been able to incorporate these theories in the programme of the Association although, in a limited form.

Marx's draft for the statutes and *Address* of the *International* was accepted unanimously with only minor amendments. The *Address* ended with the great historic slogan of *The Communist Manifesto*, 'Proletarians of All Countries, Unite!'

The preamble to the constitution of the Association came out to be one of the historic documents of the European working-class movement. Its ringing declaration:⁸

That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves ; that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule ; . . .

That the economic emancipation of the working classes is therefore the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means ; . . .

That the emancipation of labour is neither a local nor a national, but a social problem, embracing all countries in which modern society exists ; . . .

is to be recorded in history as an infallible guide to action for the working classes the world over for all time to come.

The modern working-class movement assumed full form and marched forward through many contradictions, innumerable groupings and regroupings. It began vibrating the world. Emergence of Indian working-class movement is an inseparable part of this world phenomenon.

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DISINTEGRATION OF TRADITIONAL INDIAN ECONOMY

Form of Old Indian Economy and Society :

INDIA to-day with an area of 3.3 million sq. km. and inhabited by 550 million people is standing at a nodal point of history. The basic problems and conflicts that have gripped the modern world find their intense manifestation in India. Indian people are therefore faced with the crucial task of solving these problems and reshape their own history.

The past of the Indian people is replete with facts of bitter struggle against feudal autocracy, foreign subjugation, inhuman exploitation and brutal torture. Imperialist plunder of the wealth and resources of this vast territory and the life and labour of its people and finally absolute domination for the last two centuries, reduced Indian people to a miserably impoverished mass. Western capitalist penetration in Indian economy further intensified this exploitation. The mass of the Indian people again and again rose against this exploitation and imperialist domination and struggled to shape their own destiny.

First elements of capitalism appeared in India a little more than a century ago and it gradually developed through a very complicated social and economic process. Modern Indian working class is a product of the capitalist development in India. The extremely intricate process and distinctive problems relating to the genesis of Indian working class constitute a subject of detailed and elaborate study. Certain facts may, however, help to grasp the fundamental trend of this process. Marx's analysis of the Indian economy and social system remains to be an unerring guide to such a study. Marx contributed a series of articles on India to the New York *Daily Tribune* when the renewal of the East India Company's Charter came for the last time before British Parliament in 1853. These together with

various references to India made in different chapters of his celebrated work "Capital" furnish the kernel of Marx's thought on India. Marx's analysis starts from the characteristics of 'Asiatic Economy' which arose of the remains of primitive communism in the village system below and the despotic Central Government above. In the first volume of 'Capital' Marx makes a penetrating analysis of the traditional Indian economy and social system. It is interesting to note that when Marx is thus analyzing the Indian society, Industrial Revolution has already taken place in England and capitalism is expanding from England to other European countries. This traditional system of Indian industry and agriculture was, however, laid waste by imperialist plunderage. Establishment of the Railways and certain connected industries in furtherance of colonial interest completed the process. In the first volume of 'Capital' Marx presents a vivid description of this old economic and social system:¹

These small and extremely ancient Indian communities, some of which have continued down to this day, are based on possession in common of the land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on the unalterable division of labour, which serves, whenever a new community is started, as a plan and scheme ready cut and dried.

Occupying areas of from 100 up to several thousand acres, each forms a compact whole producing all it requires. The chief part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of a commodity. Hence, production here is independent of that division of labour brought about in Indian society as a whole, by means of the exchange of commodities. It is the surplus alone that becomes a commodity, and a portion of even that, not until it has reached the hands of the State, into whose hands from time immemorial a certain quantity of these products has found its way in the shape of rent in kind. The constitution of these communities varies in different parts of India. In those of the simplest form, the land is tilled in common, and the produce divided among the members. At the same time, spinning and weaving are carried on in each family as subsidiary industries. Side by side with the masses thus occupied with one and the same work, we find the 'Chief inhabitant', who is judge, police, and tax-gatherer in one; the book-keeper, who keeps the amounts of the tillage and registers everything relating thereto; another official, who prosecutes criminals, protects strangers travelling through and escorts them to the next village; the boundary man, who guards the boundaries against neighbouring communities;

the water-overseer, who distributes the water from the common tanks for irrigation; the Brahmin, who conducts the religious services; the schoolmaster who on the sand teaches the children reading and writing; the calender—Brahmin, or astrologer, who makes known the lucky or unlucky days for seed-time and harvest, and for every other kind of agricultural work; a smith and a carpenter, who make and repair all the agricultural implements; the potter, who makes all the pottery of the village; the barber, the washerman, who washes clothes, the silversmith, here and there the poet, who in some communities replaces the silversmith, in others the school-master. This dozen of individuals is maintained at the expense of the whole community. If the population increases, a new community is founded, on the pattern of the old one, on unoccupied land. The whole mechanism discloses a systematic division of labour; but a division like that in manufacturers is impossible, since the smith and the carpenter, &c., find an unchanging market, and at the most there occur, according to the sizes of the villages, two or three of each, instead of one. The Law that regulates the division of labour in the community acts with irresistible authority of law of Nature, at the same time that each individual artificer, the smith, the carpenter, and so on, conducts in his workshop all the operations of his handicraft in the traditional way, but independently, and without recognising any authority over him. The simplicity of the organisation for production in these self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form, and when accidentally destroyed, spring up again on the spot and with the same name—this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies, an unchangeableness in such striking contrast with the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic States, and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty. The structure of the economical elements of society remains untouched by the storm-clouds of the political sky.

This description of Marx brings out the essence of old Indian economy and society.

New Feudal Order to Subserve Imperialism :

But the colonial rule and exploitation by the British imperialists completely ruined the system of production of these traditional and self-sufficient societies. As the British army advanced and occupied different territories of India as a sequel to the victory in the battle of Plassey in 1757, the old economic system and social divisions of labour obtaining in those territories were also shattered simultaneously. Along with this occupation, the surplus products of the occupied zones also fell into the hands of the colonialists who then started direct

plundering of and exporting the wealth of India to England. Imposing a high rate of taxation on internal trade of India and simultaneously engaging itself in money-lending business, the East India Company extorted a huge sum of money from the Indian people. Referring to this direct plunder Karl Marx observed:²

During the whole course of the 18th century the treasures transported from India to England were gained much less by comparatively insignificant commerce, than by the direct exploitation of that country, and by the colossal fortunes there extorted and transmitted to England.

East India Company acted as the vehicle for draining India's wealth into Britain. The sweat and blood of the Indian people, reduced to money, became one of the principal sources of the primitive accumulation of capital in Britain. According to obviously minimised statistics, the British colonialists derived from India during the period of 55 years between 1757 and 1812 a direct income exceeding £100,000,000.³

Conspiratorial military victory and plundering of the wealth of the conquered areas continued for several decades. Subsequently the colonialists realized that the exploitation should be regulated and legalized in some way to ensure permanent revenues and consolidation of British rule. So in the interest of British industrial capital, the imperialists introduced certain administrative methods and some changes in the land system.

In 1793 during the viceroyalty of Lord Cornwallis, the British Colonialists passed the Act of Permanent Settlement, fixing a constant rate of taxation to be exacted from the Zemindars of Eastern India. The 1793 Act and subsequent Acts conferred the formal rights of land-ownership to none but the Zemindars, the hereditary rights of village community members and petty feudal lords were not recognized. This system at once dispossessed the people of Bengal Presidency of their hereditary claims to the soil in favour of the native tax-gatherers called Zemindars.

Despite securing a kind of right to land-ownership, the feudal Zemindars was compelled to turn over ten-eleventh of the rent to the British colonial State, failing which, the State sold his land to anyone who could pay the sum. So in a bid to satisfy the colonial rulers and also for self-aggrandizement, the Zemindars intensified exploitation of the peasantry and not

infrequently raised it to inhuman heights. While their own instalments payable to the government, were fixed, the Zemindars enjoyed the freedom of increasing the rate of taxation on the peasantry. With the disappearance of ancient Indian feudal nobility through this process, a new stratum of landlords originating from the moneylenders, tradesmen, and colonial officials appeared on the scene. A series of parasitic middlemen also sprouted out between the cultivator and the Zemindar each one of whom sought to extort his own pound of flesh thereby sharpening the exploitation of the peasantry beyond all proportions.

In the south of India the colonialists introduced the ryotwari system to exploit the peasantry. The peasant became a permanent tenant of a plot of land, a toiler of the soil entangled with obligations and in fact chained to the land as a serf.

Thus the Zemindari and the ryotwari systems were the two principal ways in which the modified feudal methods of exploiting the peasants were preserved. These systems while fully subserved the interests of the colonialists, degraded the peasantry to the position of semi-slaves.

Destruction of Indigenous Industry and Overpressure on Village Economy :

Simultaneous with exporting of the plundered wealth of India to England in furtherance of her Industrial Revolution, the English capitalists felt the need of marketing in India the industrial products of England. This in other words meant a free trade with India. The exclusive monopoly of trade with India so long enjoyed by the East India Company since the battle of Plassey in 1757 did not protect the interest of free trade of the British capitalist class as a whole. Prompted by an energetic search for new markets, the English bourgeoisie unleashed a large-scale campaign to abolish the privileges of the East India Company. In 1813 the East India Company's monopoly in the trade with India was abolished opening the door of free trade with India. This in fact indicated a new phase in the economic exploitation of India. The East India Company had so long been earning profits mainly by exporting to and selling Indian silk, muslin and other luxury goods in England. But after 1813

Indian market was laid open to British industrial commodities resulting in a rapid increase of British exports to India.

From £1,600,000 in 1814 it grew to £5,800,000 in 1828, or one-eighth of all British export. The total tonnage of British ships engaged in trade with India in 1828 reached nearly 110,000 tons.

In 1814 Britain shipped 213,000 yards of plain and 800,000 yards of coloured cotton textiles to India; in 1826 the totals were 16 and 26 millions yards respectively.⁴

Through the rapid introduction of the Railways in India connecting the commercial centres with the ports, the British imperialists endeavoured to prop up the export operations.

This unrestricted export of British merchandise to India was combined with the imposition of heavy import duty ranging from 70 to 80 per cent on the cost of the imported Indian textile and silk products in England. While Indian economy doubly suffered and the textile industry in particular came to ruination by way of this devastating discrimination in the trading policy of the colonialists, the British manufacturing industry and particularly its textile wing thrived in rapid pace. So it is not by technical superiority alone, but also by the policy of free trade on the one hand and prohibition of Indian imports on the other that the imperialists ruined the indigenous Indian industry and pushed ahead industrial development in their own country. This happened not only in the case of Indian textile industry, Indian metallurgical and other industries also were ruined in the same way.

Indian raw material was an indispensable item for the development of British manufacturing industry. Thus as it was the interest of the British imperialists to flood Indian market with British industrial products, so also was their urgent necessity to import Indian raw materials and agricultural products to England. This monstrous trading policy designed by the imperialists transformed India into an agrarian and raw material adjunct of capitalist Britain, simultaneously preserving feudal methods of exploitation.

This forced transformation of India under colonial rule into an agrarian and raw material adjunct of England generated a disastrous effect on the internal division of labour, primarily the division between indigenous industry and agriculture. This process cruelly forced out the Indian craftsmen from their age-long professions and these uprooted people had no alternative

but to crowd the already overburdened villages. The ancient integrating element of the unity of industrial and agricultural production unique in traditional Indian economy was snapped, a civilization of thousand years' duration was undermined, and the structure of Indian society disintegrated. This phenomenon intensified the suffering of the Indian working masses and made the process of India's transformation into an agrarian and raw material adjunct of Britain a gravely tortuous one.

The terrible overcrowding of Indian village economy, the ruinous consequences of which continues to haunt the lot of the Indian people even today, has thus its origin in the policy of brutal colonial exploitation of India by the British imperialists.

The growth of modern Indian industry, the emergence of Indian working class, its subsequent development and the intricate problems connected with it are to be considered in the historical perspective of this phenomenal overpressure on the agrarian economy of India.

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DEVELOPMENT OF CAPITALIST ECONOMY IN INDIA AND EMERGENCE OF THE WORKING CLASS

The Railways and Initial Industries 1850-1900 :

THE process of development of capitalism over the ruins of feudalism as it was in the case of Europe was not to be found in India. Although the Imperialist rulers devastated the old Indian economy, they did not supplant it by unleashing the forces of modern capitalist economy. So, growth of capitalist economy in India followed a different path with accompaniment of strange contradictions, impediments and untold sufferings for the Indian people. Despite this, British rule in India produced two kinds of results, one destructive and the other regenerating. To consolidate colonial exploitation, it on the one hand annihilated the old Asiatic society and on the other was constrained to take some steps, the objective consequences of which rendered the growth of capitalist economy irresistible, although through a very halting and painful course.

Introduction of railways in India was the event of foremost importance in this process. For transportation of the goods imported from England from the ports of India to the interior of the country, for carrying the raw materials from the countryside to the ports, for quick movement of the army to suppress the Indian people through military might—in a word to consolidate colonial rule and exploitation, introduction of railways in India turned out to be an indispensable task for the British imperialists. In 1853 Viceroy, Lord Dalhousie, wrote his 'famous minute' pointing out 'the great social, political and commercial advantages to be gained from connecting the three Presidency cities—and these with the north-west frontier—by rail'.

It is pertinent to quote here Marx's famous saying regarding the future results of British rule in India as he keenly observed

this new aspect. With an amazing capacity of foresight he wrote :¹

I know that the English millocracy intend to endow India with railways with the exclusive view of extracting at diminished expenses the cotton and other raw materials for their manufactures. But when you have once introduced machinery into the locomotion of a country, which possesses iron and coals, you are unable to withhold it from its fabrication. You cannot maintain a net of railways over an immense country without introducing all those industrial processes necessary to meet the immediate and current wants of railway locomotion, and out of which there must grow the application of machinery to those branches of industry not immediately connected with railways. The railway system will therefore, become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry.

So simultaneous with the introduction of railways with express commercial purpose, investment of British capital in other ancillary industries directly or indirectly connected with railways also became an inevitability.

First railway building in India was undertaken by two private British companies, the Great Indian Railway Company and the Great Peninsular Railway Company, founded in London in 1845. Twenty miles were laid in 1853, 288 in 1857. Large-scale construction began, however, only after the great revolt of 1857-59 when the colonialists fully grasped the significance of communication lines to maintain their domination.

Modern Indian working class first germinated in this construction of railways in India. Hundreds of workers who were engaged in this railway building were the harbingers of modern Indian working class.

Coal was indispensable for railway locomotion and quick expansion occurred in coal mining industry also along with construction of railways. Discovery and use of coal started in 1770. The Bengal Coal Company was founded in 1843 and the large collieries in Jharia came into operation in 1895.

More effective means of communication, mainly railways and shipping lines being established, there was an increase in the number of mercantile enterprises importing manufactured goods and exporting raw materials, as well as in all types of plantation. As some raw materials needed initial processing before export, enterprises like rice mills, packing houses, flour mills, cotton pressing and ginning establishments, etc. sprang up like mushrooms to meet this need.

The coal industry along with these ancillary industries also gave rise to the Indian working class.

Meanwhile, plantation farming also developed intensively. The first British Tea Company, Assam Tea, appeared in 1839. Although at the initial stage tea plantations faced many difficulties, with investment of immense British capital the industry greatly flourished. The contract labour used in the plantations differed little from slave labour and these semi-slaves also formed part of the growing Indian labour.

Jute industry also developed simultaneously. This industry monopolized by the British capitalists attracted much of the exported British capital. Jute was discovered by the East India Company in 1775. It was first processed at Dundee in England in 1835. The first jute mill of India was founded in 1854 by Aukland at Rishra, near Calcutta. The industry found a high concentration of capital, and this by 1886 had led to the establishment of the Indian Jute Mills Association.

Especially important for the development of capitalism in India was the emergence of textile mills belonging to the Indian bourgeoisie. The first cotton mill of India was 'Fort Glauster Mills' founded in 1818 at Bauria, near Calcutta. But as jute industry was concentrated in Bengal due to growth of raw jute in that province, similar reason led to the development of cotton industry mainly in Maharashtra area. Cowasji Nanabhoy Davar founded the first cotton mill in Bombay in 1854 and by 1879-80 sprang up 58 cotton mills. After establishment of first two organized industries of India—jute and cotton, thousands of workers were employed in those industries which led to a great numerical increase of Indian labour.

The great revolt of 1857 sparked off far-reaching changes in the course of Indian history. As this revolt led the Britishers to establish in India railways and communication lines, the opposition of the English industrialists against the administrative control of the East India Company over India was nearing success in the post-revolt period. The English industrialists considered the East India Company's administration a direct hindrance to the effective utilization of Indian market and ultimately the agitation of these industrialists and the exigencies of imperialist interest led to the take-over of the administration of India directly by the English Crown in 1858.

Expansion of commerce and industry in India by the English bourgeoisie opened up big opportunities to the Indian compradores and to some elements in the ranks of interpreters, book-keepers, personal assistants or chief agents working in English business houses and to the Indian Zemindars as well for making a good amount of fortune and a section of them subsequently ventured in capital investment in industrial enterprises. This section of the compradores, *banians* and Zamindars formed the first contingent of Indian bourgeoisie. These industrial enterprises run by the Indian bourgeoisie employed a large number of workers which added to the numerical strength of the Indian labour.

Abundance of raw material and cheap labour lured the British capitalists to invest large amount of capital in setting up industries in India—jute, coal mining, and tea plantations claiming the major part of it. Calcutta turned out to be the main capital of British investment while Bombay developed as the principal centre of Indian capital.

Development of large industrial units and expanding commercial operations towards the close of the nineteenth century caused the growth and quick modernization of large cities and ports like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. These cities and ports became the centres round which Indian labour developed as an organized class.

Effect of Swadeshi Movement :

The profound social and economic essence of the broad penetration of the British monopolies into the colonial infrastructure and limited participation of Indian capital therein added with far-reaching reforms in the exchange, currency, and financial system in the 'nineties lay in the fact that they completed and consolidated the forcible transition of colonial India from one qualitative state to another. The towns continuing to grow in importance as trade and financial centres, a large section of the urban population, the petty and middle merchants and industrial bourgeoisie along with a stratum of intellectuals came into being. The people in these strata very early felt and, more important perhaps, came to understand the full burden of colonial enslavement and the need for a change.

The latter half of the nineteenth century therefore witnessed

the beginning of a national regeneration. The intellectuals as a definite social stratum confined within a very restricted sphere of activity and finding no gainful employment became loudly critical of different aspects of colonial administration. The most enlightened representatives of the intellectuals came forward with programmes of social reforms and imbuing the newly educated stratum of people with progressive outlook. The imperialists did not, however, fail to realize the import of this regenerating current and they were quick to channelize this in such a manner as to safeguard their own interest. Viceroy Lord Dufferin promptly found in Mr. Allen Octavian Hume, a retired civilian officer and a prospective social worker, a fit person to do the job and at the initiative of Mr. Hume Indian National Congress was founded in 1885.

But it was not possible for the imperialists to check the course of history and its dialectical process. Eventually this very National Congress turned out to be the organ through which the Indian bourgeoisie and the common masses came into conflict with the imperialist power changing the course of history. But that part of Indian history is beyond the scope of this volume. But a short discussion of the events involving India's industrialization, emergence and development of her working class is necessary in the interest of the relevant subject itself.

Swadeshi movement was such an event born out of agitation to reverse the decision of Lord Curzon to partition Bengal in 1905. The bourgeois leaders of this agitation called upon the people to boycott foreign goods and purchase indigenous products. This movement for purchasing indigenous goods is what is known as Swadeshi movement. The movement soon spread out from Bengal to other parts of India transforming it into a movement for stopping import of British manufactured goods on the one hand and establishment of industrial enterprises by the Indian bourgeoisie on the other. At the crest of this movement manufacturing, banking and insurance industries under the Indian bourgeoisie grew up rapidly. The famous steel factory of Tata was founded in 1908 at the top of this movement. The boycott movement against textile goods of Manchester was availed of by the Indian bourgeoisie by solidly organizing textile industry in Bombay, Ahmedabad and to some

extent in Bengal. This Swadeshi movement considerably satisfied the urge of the Indian bourgeoisie for industrial entrepreneurship. But the swelling of the ranks of the Indian industrial proletariat in consequence of this phase of industrialization was of cardinal importance in the revolutionary history of India.

Peculiarities Accompanying the Growth of Indian Working Class :

The principal factors underlying the growth and formation of the Indian working class at the latter half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth although bear large similarities with that of the advanced capitalist countries of Europe, the process in India was, however, marked with great and fundamental differences having far-reaching effect on the history of Indian labour.

With the advance of capitalism in Europe also, the artisans and craftsmen were dispossessed of their professions as their small units failed to compete with the large manufacturing enterprises. But in England or in other advanced European countries those artisans and craftsmen were not forced out of the towns to crowd the village economy as they found employment in the large industries as soon as they were dispossessed of their old professions. While they entered the modern industries to work as labourers fully possessing their age-old skill and characteristics of city-dwellers, soon they also got organized as modern working class keeping pace with the advance of the capitalist system.

Condition of the Indian workers in this respect was just the opposite. In India the traditional handicrafts and cottage industry were destroyed in colonial interest. But unlike Europe, modern industry did not grow up in its place, the dispossessed artisans and craftsmen were compelled to depend on village economy and earn their livelihood as landless peasant and agricultural labour. Subsequently with the introduction of railways and sporadic growth of some industries, a section of these very people at the lowest rung of Indian society who had been plodding through immense sufferings and impoverishment in village life entered these modern industries as labourers. Firstly, during the gap of two or three generations that separated destruction of traditional cottage industry and its partial replacement by

modern industry, the dispossessed artisans and handicraftsmen lost their age-old technical skill and when they entered the modern industry, they did it without any initial skill. Secondly, the men when after their long and close association with agricultural life, entered the modern industries and got transformed into modern worker, they did it in full inheritance of the legacy and various superstitious habits and customs of agricultural life. There was no opportunity for these men to get out of casteism, racialism and religious superstition of Indian social life and of the harmful influence of medieval ideas. They were born as Indian working class remaining deeply imbued with the obscurantist ideas and backward trends. This had gravely harmful and far-reaching effect on the organization and movement of the Indian working class. Referring to this condition M. N. Roy observed:²

Nevertheless, considerable number of workers had been concentrated in the factory towns of Bombay and Bengal even in the closing years of the last century.

Most of these workers were unskilled, fresh from the village to which they were still bound by family ties or the fascination of a miserable piece of land, heavily encumbered with debt. The city-worker of modern India did not come out of the ranks of the expropriated artisans; he came mostly from the peasantry. After having lost its trade, the artisan was pushed back to the land, where he had come to stay two or three generations before the call of modern industry brought him again to the city. The normal course of industrial development was obstructed in India. Industry did not grow through the successive phases of handicraft, manufacture, small factory, mechanofacture and then mass production. So the Indian worker has not been trained in industry. He lacks the proletarian tradition.

These peculiarities accompanying the birth of the Indian workers acted as a positive hindrance to the development of their modern outlook and political consciousness. In fact, these peculiarities did not encumber the Indian worker only, these were the general characteristics of the working class of the colonies and semi-colonies. Analyzing these characteristics and its influence on the labour movement of the colonies and semi-colonies the thesis of the Communist International pointed out:³

The working class in the colonies and semi-colonies has characteristic features which are important in the formation of an independent working-class movement and proletarian class ideology in these countries. The greater part of the colonial proletariat comes from the pauperized village, with which the worker retains his connection

even when engaged in industry. In the majority of colonies (with the exception of some large industrial towns such as Sanghai, Bombay & Calcutta etc.) we find, as a general rule, only the first generation of a proletariat engaged in large-scale production. The rest is made of ruined artisans driven from the decaying handicrafts, which are widespread even in the most advanced colonies. The ruined artisan, the small property owner, carries with him into the working class the narrow craft-sentiments and ideology through which national reformist influence can penetrate the colonial labour movement.

Taking advantage of this situation, at the initial stage of the Indian labour movement the Indian bourgeoisie preaching reformist ideology and propagating superstitious ideas in the name of Indian tradition tried to keep Indian working class off the revolutionary struggle.

Problems Hindering the Growth :

The problems attending the Indian worker in its establishment as a new class are born out of the basic process relating to brutal colonial exploitation. The protracted and tortuous disintegration of feudalism and the retarded growth of capitalism, the wide gap between the decline of the old types of production and the rise of the new, gave birth to a number of problems affecting the formative process of the Indian working class. One problem was the incredibly low standard of living of the bulk of the working masses and its deliberate preservation even by the foremost type of capitalist enterprise foisted on India by monopoly capital. When the British recruited workers from among the ruined craftsmen and the poorest strata in the villages, they fixed wages conforming to these rural standards, which were much below the cost of labour. Some documentary facts will clarify the situation. The evidence submitted by Raja Rammohun Roy in connection with the discussions leading to the revision of the East India Company's Charter in 1833 is illuminating. Some of the answers given by him to the questionnaire are reproduced below:⁴

Q. What is the rate of wages generally allowed to the peasantry and labourers?

A. In Calcutta, artisans, such as blacksmiths and carpenters, if good workmen, get (if my memory be correct) from 10 to 12 rupees a month (that is about 20s. to 24s.); common workmen, who do inferior plain work, 5 or 6 rupees (that is about 10s. or 12s. sterling money); masons from 5 to 7 (10s. to 14s.) a month; common

labourers about 3½ and some 4 rupees ; gardeners or cultivators of land about 4 rupees a month ; and palanquin bearers the same. In small towns the rates are something below this ; in the country places still lower.

Q. On what kind of provisions do they subsist ?

A. In Bengal they live most commonly on rice, with a few vegetables, salt and hot spices, and fish. I have, however, often observed the poorer classes living on rice and salt only. In the Upper Provinces they use wheaten flour instead of rice, and the poorer classes frequently use *bajarah* &c. (millet &c.) . . .

Q. What sort of houses do they inhabit ?

A. In higher Bengal and the upper and the Western Provinces they occupy mud huts ; in the lower and eastern parts of Bengal, generally hovels composed of straw, mats and sticks ; the higher classes only having houses built of brick and lime.

Q. How they are clothed ?

A. . . . the poorer classes of labourers have merely a small strip of cloth girt round their loins for the sake of decency, and are in other respects quite naked . . .

Rammohun Roy submitted this memorandum in a period when traditional economy of India was in the process of being shattered under the burden of colonial exploitation. Inhuman pauperization of the masses and the tremendous gap between destruction of old economy and its replacement by a new one converted India into a cheap reservoir of mankind for labour, one of the consequences of which was the large-scale immigration of Indian labouring masses to the plantation industries in different British colonies.

Consequent upon the abolition of slave-trade and slave-system in 1807 and 1833 respectively, the colonies like British Guiana, West Indies, Mauritius felt an acute want of slave-labour. Indian labour was then sought to be introduced in the plantations of these colonies and groups of pauperized Indian labouring masses were exported thereto. This emigrant Indian labour was another victim of brutal colonial exploitation, some details of which would be dealt with in the following chapter.

The protracted existence of the worst forms and methods of colonial exploitation and an extremely misshapen development of capitalism caused also internal migration of the people from the poorest stratum of the society. Big groups of the impoverished masses moved from their native villages to distant places in search of jobs where new capitalist industries were set up or where the mining and plantations developed. They

settled there permanently and worked as labour. In such a vast country like India with tremendous diversity of language, culture, religious belief and social custom, this mass migration from one province to another and permanent settlement in an altogether different environment gave rise to certain peculiar problems in the formation of the Indian working class and its movement.

The method of recruitment of plantation labour in India and their condition of service depict another cruel aspect of colonial rule. All these abnormalities stood out as grave problems on the way of Indian labour rising as a definite and independent class keeping pace with the development of capitalism.

Growing migration of labouring masses although fraught with different problems, reflected, however, the growth of capitalist relations in the country. This migration was indicative of the process of forming a stable labour market. An official document gives the following picture of migration of the masses from the United Provinces:⁵

. . . the stream of emigration has become bigger every year. Its exact extent is not easy to determine, but it has been said, probably without much exaggeration, that in all the districts of the Benares division (and Gorakhpur and Eastern Oudh—A.L.), except perhaps Mirzapur, there is not a family, at least one member of which is not absent from home, in Bengal or elsewhere. The low-class labourers from this district perform a large portion of the unskilled labour in the industrial centres of Howrah and Calcutta; men of higher class find employment as door-keepers, messengers and overseers in the mills. In Assam a certain proportion find employment in the tea-gardens, but the majority are in general labourers, traders and boatmen.

Many secured work in the mines and at other establishments. There was also a shifting of working people inside the province, particularly during the agricultural season.

This document was an indication of the trend and extent of migration of the working population from their native villages. It happened not only in the United Provinces but in the other parts of the country as well.

But one remarkable feature was that, in spite of overcrowding of the villages and migration of people in search of livelihood, the newly established industries felt a dearth of workers. The following extract from a resolution adopted in the confe-

rence of the Indian and Ceylone Chambers of Commerce held on 6 Janary 1905 indicated the gravity of the problem:⁶

Whereas the supply of rank and file labour for organised industries is inadequate in many districts of India, and whereas the deficiency is seriously restricting the productive power of a large section of the manufacturing concerns of the country, it seems imperatively necessary to this conference that, in order to devise a remedy, measures should be taken by Government Commission otherwise to investigate the causes which have led to a state of affairs inconsistent with the relative conditions of life of the factory operative on the one hand and the agricultural classes generally on the other.

This shortage of worker beginning from the period of initial growth of the industries became acute at the close of the nineteenth century and continued till the outbreak of the first World War. The root of the crisis lay in the absence of an organized labour market till then. In 1906 Bengal Government appointed Mr. Foley, a British civilian officer to investigate into the causes of this crisis. The report he submitted was revealing. It held that there was no genuine shortage of labour and the defective method of recruitment was responsible for the shortage.⁷ The following tables would show how with the fast development of industries the demand for labour was also rising in the background of the artificial shortage:⁸

1. Jute Industry

Year	No. of looms	No. of workers
1879-80	4,946	27,494
1895-96	10,169	78,114
1902-03	17,189	118,904
1904-05	19,991	113,164
1906	23,534	154,962 appx.

2. Coal Mines

Year	No. of workers
1894	30,773
1903	74,538
1904	75,749

3. Tea Gardens (in Assam)

Year				No. of workers
1890	...	...	...	406,089
1900	...	...	...	664,897

Despite the growing demand of labour on the one hand and utter impoverishment of the rural masses on the other offering great potential sources of labour, the appalling conditions of service in the factories, want of accommodation and other difficulties could not sufficiently attract the poor people to work in the factories. Rather, on many an occasion these people were in search of other sources of livelihood at a time when the factories were running short of labour. To quote one author:⁹

The following districts in the Bengal province were considered to be 'congested' districts in 1901 (and were therefore expected to supply labour): Saran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Northern Sahabad, Patna, Northern Monghyr, and parts of Balasore and Cuttack. Total emigration from Saran (which used to send the maximum number of emigrants to the other parts every year) to the different districts of Bengal in 1901 was 138,902. Of these about 35,000 emigrated to Eastern Bengal (i.e. took to agricultural work) and 47,000 to the industrial belts of Calcutta. Similarly, of the total emigrants from Muzaffarpur (numbering 67,325) only about 20,000 migrated to the industrial belts of Calcutta.

The facts substantiate that the migration of the impoverished masses was not always directed towards the industrial centres.

The exploitation of the proletariat was distinguished by features which, as a rule, were no longer to be found in the developed capitalist countries and which aggravated the problems of the workers. There was usually a middleman between the workers and employers, who did the recruiting and to some extent paid the workers. He was called by a variety of names: jobber, sirdar, mistri, mukaddam, choudhri, etc. according to the variance of dialect and language in different parts of the country. The undeveloped character of the labour market and the chaotic condition of the economy in general accounted largely for the existence of such middlemen.

Further, national, religious and caste heterogeneity was typical of the Indian proletariat. The distribution of workers

throughout the country also varied because of uneven development of capitalism in the country. Calcutta, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Madras and a few other places became the main centres round which the Indian proletariat was concentrated. The remaining vast expanse of the country was left in fact out of bounds to modern industries.

All these features added to the problems of the Indian proletariat on the way of consolidating itself as a homogeneous class. These problems considerably affected the development of its class consciousness and the process of emerging out as the most modern and revolutionary class free from all medieval survivals.

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ADVANCE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION AND CONDITIONS OF WORKING CLASS

Advance of Industry :

IN India foundation of modern industries was laid approximately between 1850 and 1870. Therefore this was also the period of emergence of the Indian working class. The subsequent years witnessed the advance of industrialization and hence that of the working class also. This advance was found accelerating at the turn of the century. The present discussion relates to this initial period of striding ahead.

By 1890 India had certain large factory industries. 'Of some 300,000 people employed in factories and mines, about 200,000 were in cotton mills, jute mills and coal mines in the proportions of 11, 6 and 3. The growth from 1890 until the World War was fairly steady in all fields, cotton spindles more than doubled, cotton power looms quadrupled, jute looms increased four and a half times, and coal raisings six times, while the extension of railways continued at the rate of about 800 miles per annum.'¹

The jute factories monopolized by British capital that started growing at the close of the nineteenth century numbered as much as 64 during 1913-14 employing a total of 216,000 workers.² Besides Bengal, a few factories developed in other places also.

The cotton textile industry monopolized by Indian capital that started growing mainly at Bombay at the middle of the nineteenth century considerably flourished at the beginning of the twentieth. The fact that the figure of only 95 mills with a total of 74,000 workers rose up to 197 mills with a total of 195,000 workers within a period of 20 years from 1886 to 1905 indicated the extent of development of the industry.³

The coal industry too was marked by considerable development. While during 1896-1900, a total of 191 mines were under operation with a labour force of 61,367 only, during the years 1901-1905, the corresponding figures rose up to 279 and 82,186. During 1911-1915, with a big leap the number of mines under operation and the total labour force reached the figures of 554 and 128,884 respectively.⁴

In the house building and communication industries also a rise in the labour force to the extent of 18.2 per cent and 29.4 per cent respectively was evidenced in the period between 1901 and 1911.

Skipping over other inessential industrywise details, a look into the table below will help following the progress of industry and of the numerical strength of the working class.⁵

Year			No. of factories	Average daily number employed
1894	...	...	815	349,810
1902	...	...	1,533	541,634
1914	...	...	2,936	950,973

Indian capitalist enterprises which grew up side by side with the British ones in all spheres of the national economy, were part and parcel of new capitalism emerging in the country. Indian capitalism represented a change in the socio-economic evolution of the country. The imperialists tried to misshape and hamper this change and utilize it in their interest, but could not halt. Indian capitalist enterprise never enjoyed parity as a unit of the capitalist mode of production in the country. Doing the bidding of British capital, the colonial administration, far from encouraging Indian enterprise, slighted it and effectively stifled many of its undertakings.

Despite obviously conflicting interests between the British and Indian capitalist entrepreneurship and the overtly discriminatory policy of the British Government in favour of private capitalist investment from Britain, growth of industry was perceptible in different branches.

Development of communication in all the three branches, *i.e.*, railway, road transport and shipping lines was another note-

worthy feature during this period. Improved transport, both internal and external generated a revolutionary process in Indian economic and social life. But unfortunately, coming as it did in a country under colonial rule, it did not come with a protection to Indian market. Had there been that protection, it would have provided a great stimulus to Indian manufacturing. The net effect of this development of communication can be very succinctly put up in the words of D. H. Buchanan: 'while improved transport was a *sine qua non* of the growth of manufacturing in the country, it was accompanied by such a combination of conditions—free trade and competition with other countries already far advanced in industry—as to develop European rather than Indian Industry'.⁶

However, according to the figures available from Census of India, 1911, among the industrial establishments connected with transport, the railwayshops stood first, employing about 100,000 workers or 79 per cent of the workers in that industry.⁷

Working and Living Conditions :

During the early period of its growth in England or in other Western countries, the working class had to work and subsist under an unbearable condition. Wages, working hours, employment of child labour, housing and in all other spheres the extent of exploitation was appallingly excessive. But the nature of that exploitation on the Indian labour during its germinating period and for a long time thereafter, for reasons of its being under a rapacious colonial rule, was more terrifying.

Fifteen to sixteen hours working at a stretch was a most common practice during the early phase. Even the women and child labour were made to work in the same way. What was more, children as little as between five and six years of age were also inhumanly tied to the grinding wheels of the factory. Utter neglect of any precautionary measures at the time of working with the machinery led to frequent accidents resulting in physical mutilation of the workers and for that no compensation was paid. Wages too were below subsistence level.

The exploitation of the Indian working class was expressed chiefly in the fact that both British and Indian capitalists secured absolute surplus value. Working hours of maximum

length, from dawn to dusk and often even longer was the most striking indication of the brutal manner in which labour was exploited. Even the official report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission which was appointed in 1908 to enquire into various recommendations made by the Freer Smith Committee in respect of certain amendments in the existing Factory Act, could not hide this inhuman picture. According to this report, in Ahmedabad the average working period in a day was 12 hours, and at some factories using electric power it was no less than 14 hours. In Bombay also the average was 12 hours, but in 60 out of 85 cotton mills where electricity was used, the labourers had to work not less than 13 to 15 hours. In Broach the working period lasted $14\frac{1}{2}$ to $13\frac{1}{2}$, in Delhi $13\frac{1}{2}$ to $14\frac{1}{2}$, in Agra it ranged from 13 hours 45 minutes to 15 hours 15 minutes, in Amritsar and Lahore from 13 to 13 hours 40 minutes. But the British capitalists owning the jute mills of Calcutta set the record making the weavers of these mills work for 15 hours and also from $15\frac{1}{2}$ to 16 hours in some cases.⁸

'Dusk to dawn working hours' meaning thereby maximum working hour depending on the availability of sunlight was further lengthened with the introduction of electric light. The report of the Textile Factories Committee of 1906 also admitted this fact. The report, *inter alia* stated, "The introduction of the electric light in Indian mills has led to excessive hours of running. The machinery in certain mills is in motion from about 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. ; in others the hours of running are less, but in busy times they would be increased."⁹

Worse was the condition in the ginning factories. Drawing pointed attention to this, the Factory Labour Commission stated,¹⁰ 'We have seen that operatives in ginning factories have had, on occasions, to work 17 and 18 hours a day. In rice mills and flour mills men have occasionally to work 20 to 22 hours. In printing presses men have had to work 22 hours a day for seven consecutive days.' Further, ' . . . the children under 14, as a rule, were worked during the whole running hours of the factories, thus working from 10 to 14 hours a day ; and the employment of under-aged as half-timers for the whole day was facilitated by adoption of the practice of splitting up the children's sets into two or more working periods.'¹¹

An inferno on the earth will not perhaps be an imprecise

epithet to define the horrors of the capitalist exploitation under colonial rule.

But this is not enough. According to a report furnished by Mr. Tom Drewett, the Senior Inspector of Boilers, Bombay, 'The ginning season lasts about eight months, about five of which the hands work from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. and the remaining three months they work day and night. The hands are mostly women. . . I think, it will be found that the women had worked day and night for as long as a week at a stretch. . . I do not think there is a double set of children anywhere, so they must have worked 23 out of 24 hours.'¹² An employer Mr. R. F. Wadia himself stated the conditions in one of his factories. 'In ordinary seasons, that is when work is not very pressing, the engine starts between 4 and 5 a.m. and stops at 7, 8 or 9 p.m. without any stoppage during the day. The hands work continuously all these hours, and are relieved by one another for meals. In busy seasons, that is in March and April, the gins and presses sometimes work both night and day, with half an hour's rest in the evening. The same set continue working day and night for about 8 days, and when it is impossible to go on longer, other sets are procured . . . Both the men and women come to the factories at 3 a.m., as they have no idea of the time, and they wish to make sure that they are at the factory by the time it opens, *i.e.*, 4 a.m. I have only 40 women attending these 40 gins. I have only 8 spare women. I never allow these women off the gins. I am not alone in this respect; it is the general system. There is no change of hands except at meal times . . . Those working these excessive hours frequently died.'¹³

The testimony of Tanu Rapu, an overseer further revealed, 'when there is much work they work from 4 a.m. till 10, 10-30 or 11 p.m. The men and women sometimes work for 10 or 12 days and nights at a stretch without rest.'¹⁴

In his evidence to the Indian Factory Labour Commission the manager of a mill stated, 'It is not the length of industrial working hours that is complained of, however, but the manner of their distribution. It is one thing to work during a natural working day, and quite another to get up at 4 or 4-30 a.m. according to the distance to be travelled when on the morning shift, and not get home until 9 or 9-30 when on the evening

shift; when after that the evening meal has to be prepared. And that too, in all weather during the cold, foggy, winter mornings and all through the rainy season.¹⁵

The employers did not show any sense of proportion or any human consideration in exploiting female and child labour. Children even of such tender age as between 5 and 7 were worked most cruelly everywhere. Investigations conducted by the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 revealed that half of the time, 30 to 40 per cent of those employed in the factories were tender-aged children. The Commission while narrating the mode of work of a jute mill in Bengal stated that the workers lived three to four miles away from the mill and when the siren struck at 3 o'clock in the night, the child labourers below 7 years of age attended the factory travelling on foot that distance of three to four miles in the darkness of night. Regarding female labourers also the Commission pointed out that their health fatally broke down under the strain of working whole of the night. Many of these women labourers attended the factory with suckling babies in arms.

The Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931 also testified, 'When the Factory Commission of 1908 made the investigations, many textiles mills were working from 13 to 15 hours a day with a single set of workers, and before that this practice had been fairly general.'¹⁶

When the workers physically broke down under the strain of this labour unbearable for any human being, one set was replaced by another of new recruits just like replacing a broken cog of a wheel by a fresh one.

Dewan Chaman Lall noted down another heart-rending story about the brutal exploitation on child labour as reproduced below: ¹⁷

Slavery is the Keynote of Industrial life in India. We do not have to look to countries like Liberia or Abyssinia to find forms of child slavery. We have it here in the heart of India. Not long ago a well-known public man, in the days when he was working as a school-master, disclosed that in the house adjoining his own, a large number of children used to be drafted in every day and that sometimes at night he used to hear their pitiful cries, which gave him no rest. He thought that the adjoining house was a school and that it was his duty as a school-master to report to the authorities regarding the cruelties that were being inflicted upon innocent

children. When enquiries were made, it was discovered that the adjoining house was a Lace factory in which little children of tender age were made to work unheard-of hours and it was when they were tired and when their heads bent in sleep over their work that the kind-hearted factory owner would come with his wheep and wake them up thinking that their cries and their tears were an aid to their industrial education. The name of this public man was the Right Hon'ble Srinivasa Sastri, P. C. When Mr. Sastri arrived with the Royal Commission on Labour in the town of Amritasar, he visited, along with the other members of the Commission, the carpet weaving factories owned by Greeks and Anglo-Indians, where some of the most beautiful reproduction of ancient carpets were made with the labour of children whose ages were as low as five years. Mr. Sastri discovered on his rounds a man carrying a ledger under his arm. When the ledger was examined the following entry was disclosed:

'I Boota son of Chakhi, Chowkidar of Amritasar owe Rs. 57/- of which half is 28/8/- which I have borrowed from Bootee weaver in advance. I agree that my grand-sons N and F should be handed over for carpet weaving, N to get Rs. 9/- and F to get Rs. 7/-. I will return all the money which I have borrowed to the man from whom I have borrowed.'

The foregoing evidence brought to the fore the inhuman character of the exploitation perpetrated upon the workers by way of abnormally long working-hours in the modern capitalist factories of colonial India. Summing up, it can only be said that the workers were forced to a state of semi-slavery.

Far away from these modern factories, there were the plantation workers whose conditions of work and living were worse still. This has been dealt with in the following chapter.

Besides exploitation by forcing upon the workers unbearably long working-hours, the conditions in respect of wages too tell another story as to how the Indian proletariat was degraded to a level of subhuman existence.

Evidence given by Raja Rammohun Roy as discussed in the foregoing chapter provides an indication of the wages and general economic condition of the working population of the country. After establishment of the modern capitalist factories the rate of wages that were paid to the workers was based upon the abnormally low standard of living of these mostly rural working masses whose traditional economic life had been devastated by imperialist plunder. This anachronistic way and up-side-down fashion of fixing wages point out to a peculiar

phenomenon in the life of the industrial workers of a colonial country like India, much unlike that of the Western capitalist countries.

Some facts are enough to confirm the above proposition. It is in the textiles—jute and cotton—that the chief growth in factory industry has occurred. So leaving aside the question of wages in other industries, a few instances relating to the textile industry will be of exemplary character.

In course of a government enquiry in 1892 it transpired from the statement of the Secretary of the Jute Mills Association that the rates of wages in the jute factories of Bengal ranged 'from one rupee per week for children working half-time of the simple kind of work to rupees ten or twelve per week for a skilled mechanic'.¹⁸ According to the statement of the British-Indian Association, the unskilled labourers in the jute factories were paid from Rs. 0-14-6 to Rs. 3-0-0 per week and the skilled ones from Rs. 5 to Rs. 7 per week.¹⁹

Regarding wages in cotton mills in Calcutta in the year 1892 the manager of a mill glibly stated that his average wages stood at about Rs. 6 per hand.²⁰ Investigation of a government official revealed that the wage of an adult male spinner was Rs. 10 and that of a coolie was Rs. 7 per month in the same year.²¹

The following table showing weekly wages in a Calcutta jute mill between 1896 and 1920 gives a general picture of the trends of wages in the jute industry of Bengal.²²

Average Wages (in Rs.) in a Jute Mill in Bengal

In January of		Per week							Per day	
		Carding	Rovers	Spinners	Shifters	Winders	Beamers	Weavers	Mistries	Coolies
1896	...	1.37	2.19	2.5	0.87	2.5	2.75	4.75	.81	.3
1900	...	1.44	2.25	3	1	3	3	5.25	.87	.31
1905	...	1.47	2.37	3.25	1.12	3.25	3.25	5.37	.94	.34
1910	...	1.5	2.75	3.5	1.25	3.5	3.75	5.5	1	.37
1915	...	2	3.32	3.48	1.8	3.6	4.72	5.6	1.1	.44
1920	...	2.75	5.4	4.33	2	5.88	7.29	8.75	1.32	.61

These wages show an average increase of about fifty per cent between 1896 and 1915. This approximately is the gain, the industrial wages as a whole have registered in the corresponding period.

Almost similar was the condition in respect of wages of the workers in cotton textile industry. In 1877, in the cotton mills of Bombay Presidency, the monthly wages averaged from ten to twenty rupees for men and from seven to nine rupees for women.²³ According to another official statement, in Bombay cotton mills, the average monthly rates for men was Rs. 12, women Rs. 9 and children Rs. 5.²⁴ According to Mr. J. N. Tata average monthly wages for adults stood at Rs. 11.²⁵ The same for an Ahmedabad mill was Rs. 10. According to another report the average monthly wages for a cotton mill at Agra and another at Kanpur came to be Rs. 5-8-0.²⁶ The data collected for Bombay by the Indian Factories Committee of 1890 approximately furnish the following picture.²⁷

Monthly Wages of Different Groups of Labourers

Groups			Monthly wages
Minor Girl	...	...	Rs. 5
Boy	...	...	Rs. 6 to 7
Adult Female	...	...	Rs. 6 to 10
-do- Male (other than weavers)	...	...	Rs. 10 to 12
-do- -do- (weavers)	...	...	Rs. 12 to 15

The findings of the British Royal Commission, which extended its investigations into the colonies also, pointed out the continuing stability of wage rates in India. The Inspector of Factories also stated, "The most peculiar circumstances about the rates of wages is that there seems to have been not very sensible fluctuation for the last twenty-five or thirty years."²⁸

There were also wide differences of wage-rates between Bombay and other centres. Wage-rates of Ahmedabad were somewhat nearer to that of Bombay, while rates were much lower in places like Kanpur, Sholapur and Nagpur because of plentiful and cheap labour. "The tendency of wages to increase became more marked with the closing of the mints to silver coinage in 1893 and the second period, 1895-1914, saw a distinct advance, . . ."²⁹

All these are about jute and cotton textile industries. In other small industries the condition was obviously more miserable. The most painful state of affairs in this respect is indicated by the evidence given by Mr. R. F. Wadia, a manager of a gin operating factory before the Bombay Factory Labour Commission of 1885. According to this evidence, "The hands that work from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. are paid from 3 to 4 annas per day. All the factories pay at this rate. Sometimes we pay our hands 6 pie as a bonus . . ."³⁰

If the wage-rates discussed above are compared to those cited by Raja Rammohun Roy it will be found that the wages of the industrial workers of India even in the nineties were no better than those available to the working masses of rural India as back as in the thirties. This was a highly preposterous and peculiar situation in respect of the living conditions of the Indian wage-earners at the initial phase of India's industrialization.

Housing condition of the workers during the period under discussion relates another story of how this section of the mankind was forced to an abominable and subhuman existence. In the newly developing industrial centres at the latter half of the nineteenth century there was hardly any housing arrangement for the workers who gathered there for jobs leaving their rural hearth and home. Even at the turn of the century there was no improvement worth the name. The worker along with the members of his family could not solely occupy even one room for their abode. More than one family were made to be huddled in one single room and that too without ventilation and sanitary arrangement. Thus a hellish life with devastating consequences on their health and moral, was what they were compelled to live in the wake of industrialization of colonial India.

Even the official forums in course of their investigation could not close their eyes to this revolting ignominy. On visiting a workers' slum area, the Textile Factories Labour Committee observed:³¹

The conditions can be described as deplorable. After making allowance for the very limited space which will satisfy Indian workers and their families, the houses are distinctly overcrowded, dark, damp and ill-ventilated . . . the dwellings were surrounded by narrow gullies for carrying off waste water and sullage, the offen-

sive vapour from these gullies permeating the whole of the surrounding atmosphere . . . Although not identical in all respects similar conditions were observed in other large manufacturing centres.

Census of India, 1911 revealed that 69 per cent of the population of Bombay had to live barely in single-roomed accommodation which meant an average of $4\frac{1}{2}$ persons huddling in one small ill-ventilated room. However, surprising it might appear, Census in the year 1931 brought to light a worsening condition in this respect, the occupiers of single-roomed accommodation of Bombay rising to 74 per cent of the population. It further transpired from the data collected by the Census that an average of 5 per cent of the one-third of the total population lived in one room. From a further break-up of the figures it appeared that out of 256,379 people an average of 6 to 9 lived in one-roomed accommodation, the average for 8,133 people being 10 to 19 and 20 for 15,490 people.

What the Census depicted was not an isolated case for Bombay. It was a general picture representing the conditions of Calcutta, Howrah, Kanpur, Madras and all other industrial centres of India. B. Shiva Rao, an eminent leader of the early phase of Indian Trade Union movement has given a shuddering description of the workers' slums. He writes:³²

Nothing can equal, for squalor and filth and stench, the *bustees* (workers' quarters) in Howrah and the suburbs north of Calcutta . . . The great majority of the workers in the jute mills are compelled to live in private *bustees* under the Bengal Municipalities Act. The duty of improving the slum areas is cast on the owners who make very handsome incomes from the poor occupants. But vested interests see to it that these powers under the Act are never brought into operation. It would be impossible to describe the condition of these *bustees*—'filthy disease-ridden hovels', as they have been called, with no windows, chimneys or fireplaces, and the doorways so low that one has to bend almost on one's knees to enter. There is neither light nor water supply, and of course no sanitary arrangements. Access to groups of *bustees* is usually along a narrow tunnel of filth, breeding almost throughout the year, but particularly during the rains myriads of mosquitoes and flies . . .

Condition in certain parts of Howrah, which is the second biggest municipality in Bengal, are even worse than in northern suburbs of Calcutta.

What Shiva Rao describes of a workers' accommodation in Bombay, is apt to be confused with that of a hell. He quotes

the experiences narrated by a lady doctor, who was to investigate the conditions of women workers in the city, as follows :

In one room on the second floor of a *Chowl* (blocks of flats erected for the accommodation of large number of families—author), measuring 15 feet by 12 feet, I found six families living. Six separate ovens on the floor proved this statement. On enquiry, I ascertained that the actual number of adults and children living in this room was thirty. Bamboos hung from the ceiling, over which at night clothes and sacking were flung, to partition each family allotment. Three out of six women were shortly expecting to be delivered. All the three said they would have the deliveries in Bombay. When I questioned the nurse who accompanied me as to how she would arrange for privacy in this room, I was shown a small space 4 feet by 3 feet which was usually screened off for the purpose. The atmosphere of that room at night, filled with smoke from the six ovens and other impurities, would certainly physically handicap any woman with an infant both before and after delivery. This was one of the many such rooms I saw.

About Madras he wrote, 'There are numbers of huts harbouring more than one married couple. In the congested parts of the city some rooms accommodating whole families have no access to the outside air, except through the next room, also occupied by a family. In one such place investigators found two married couples with their children in the outer room and two in the inner room. There was no window to either rooms and all cooking had to be done indoors.'³⁴

The pungent declaration of a witness before the Industrial Commission of 1916-18 is worth noting. He said, 'Although I have witnessed a good deal of poverty in my walk through life and in many countries, and although I have read a great deal about poverty . . . I did not realize its poignancy and its utter wretchedness until I came to inspect the so-called houses of the poorer classes of Bombay . . . (See the labourers) in his home amongst his family, and one instinctively asks oneself: Is this a human being or am I conjuring up some imaginary creature without a soul from the underworld?'

'In such a room—ten by ten feet—where there is hardly space to move, whole families sleep, breed, cook their food with the aid of pungent cow-dung cakes, and perform all the functions of family life, the common latrines alone being set apart. Some of the rooms so-called in the upper stories of the older houses are often nothing more than holes beneath the sloping roof, in which a man cannot stand upright. The rear

rooms are usually dark and gloomy, and it is only at a closer inspection, when one's eyes have become accustomed to the gloom, that the occupants can be seen at all.³⁵

Thus the wages, working hours, housing and other conditions of service condemned the Indian proletariat, the new social force possessing the greatest revolutionary potential in the future history of India, to such a state of existence what, to say the least, flesh and blood could hardly endure.

First Factory Act and Conditions Thereafter :

Chronological treatment of the labour legislations of India is a subject by itself and this volume does not intend a detailed analysis thereof. But in view of the condition of excessive working hours of the Indian workers, the coming into being of first Factory Act was an event of historical importance. In the background of exploitation on the Indian workers and the resistance they put up against it, the imperialist government was compelled to enact certain labour legislations. Reference to some such legislations would become inevitable in the interest of the subject itself.

The purpose of labour legislations is to exercise a control over the working hours and other conditions of service of the workers. But in colonial India the process started with an altogether opposite desire. It was not intended to give some amenities to the workers, but reversely, it was aimed at creating a permanent labour force for the employers. The Assam Plantation Labour Immigration Act, The Madras Planters' Labour Act, The Masters and Servants Act, The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act and some other acts of this early phase were designed to help the employers in recruiting and exploiting the workers. While the labourers were forced to work from 15 to 18 hours at a stretch, these acts armed the employers to punish the workers in the event of their escaping that inhumanly hard work. Even the Sections 490 and 492 of Indian Penal Code, 1860 contained similar provisions.

The Employers' and Workers' (Disputes) Act was passed in 1860. It was implemented first in Bombay, then its scope extended to Central Provinces and subsequently to the rest of the country. This act empowered the employers to fine or imprison the workers on charges of insubordination.

In today's context such an act with the embodiment of the principle of criminal penalty is beyond imagination. But it came into being in an altogether different situation when the ravishing designs of the imperialist marauders had brought the country to a state of utter ruin. The labourers, on their part were being worked excessive hours for extracting super profits while their power of resistance was yet to develop. The diabolical injunctions of these Acts are therefore to be judged in the historical perspective of that age.

Frequent visitation of famine in the years following the great revolt of 1857 gave rise to discontent among the people. The pauperized and sullen peasants started leaving their villages and crowded the towns which made the British Government apprehensive of serious troubles in the urban areas. This was the situation when Indian Penal Code of 1860 came into being and just the same attitude and apprehension were responsible also for passing the Employers' and Workers' (Disputes) Act. One official spokesman was candid enough to confess, 'At this stage the anxiety of the Government seems to have been the protection of the social system from the workmen, than to protect the workmen from the social system.'³⁶

The Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931 recommended repeal of this act which of course by then came to be virtually dead. The act was finally repealed in 1932 when Mr. N. M. Joshi tabled a bill in the Central Legislative Assembly for the purpose.

The first factory legislation was enacted in a similar background when protection of the interests of the workers did not play the uppermost in the minds of the government. The cotton textile magnates of Lancashire were faced with an embarrassing competition with their Indian counterparts who had the advantage of cheap labour and arbitrary exploitation of the labourers whether male, female or child. But the development of trade union movement in England, the existence of labour legislations and other historical factors did not allow that advantage to the millowners of Lancashire. Apprehensive of their business prospect, these millowners raised a hue and cry over this excessive exploitation of Indian labour and clamoured for labour regulation to stop these 'inhuman practices' in India. Side by side with this self-interested outcry, the genuine voice of some

philanthropists—both Indian and British—also was able to exert certain influence over the course of events.

The matter then came before the House of Commons in England and was referred to the Secretary of State for enacting necessary legislations to regulate the factory conditions in India. Thus pressurized, the Government of Bombay appointed in 1875 a commission to investigate the conditions of textile labourers. Curiously, seven out of the nine members of the commission were representatives of the millowners and no wonder this commission tried to hide the real character of the workers' distress and the government refused to do anything to ameliorate the workers' plight.

Right at this moment, Mr. Sorabjee Shapurjee Bengalee, C.B.E., a philanthropist of Bombay tried to persuade the government to change the conditions of child labour, failing which, he started an agitation for enactment of a legislation fixing the working hours of child labour. He drafted a bill on the subject and in 1878 submitted it to the Government of Bombay. That too yielded no result. But these attempts made by Mr. Bengalee received wide publicity in England and the industrialists of Lancashire lost no time to use it in their favour and repeated their demand for regulating the working hours and other service conditions of the Indian textile labourers.

This was the situation when the first Indian Factories Act ultimately came into being in the year 1881. This act prohibited employment of child labour below the age of 7 years and forbade more than 9 hours' working time for the child labour between 7 and 12 years of age. This act also required inspection and fencing of machinery. But it applied only to concerns employing 100 or more labourers and gins and presses, being classified as seasonal factories, remained beyond the scope of this act. Despite these restrictions, want of birth certificate and wholly inadequate medical inspection made little difference in conditions. In fact even in 1908 when the Indian Factory Labour Commission started its investigations employment of child labour below 7 years of age was found rampant.

One interesting aspect of this course of events is, however, worth-noting. Excessively long working hours and similarly low wages, in a word, the inhuman exploitation of labour was a general feature affecting the Indian labour both of Indian

and British-owned industries throughout the country without any discrimination whatsoever. But the so-called steps taken by the British Government to regulate the service conditions of the workers related mainly to the cotton textile industry which was substantially owned by the Indian capitalists. In the British-owned jute industry of Bengal too similarly inhuman service conditions existed. Although the jute mill owners of Dundee had to face the same competition with their counterparts of Bengal, there was no pressure from the industrialists of Dundee to regulate the service conditions of jute workers of Bengal. But it happened in the case of cotton textile workers as the competition between the cotton mill owners of England and India was in fact a clash of interests between the British and Indian capitalists.

Obviously, therefore, it was not human consideration but colonial interests that played behind passing of Indian Factories Act.

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EMIGRANT INDIAN LABOUR AND PLANTATION LABOUR

Emigrant Labour :

EMIGRATION of Indian labour to the sugar colonies of Africa and the West Indies since the thirties of the nineteenth century till early twentieth is an extremely poignant episode in the history of Indian labour. With the steady decline and ruin of tradiional economy and simultaneously rapid increase of population from about 130 million at the time of the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to 254 million in 1881, the country witnessed a formidably growing unemployment in the ranks of the landless poor masses. It was these destitute masses that migrated from India to the overseas British colonies as indentured labour.

This emigration in a limited scale commenced as early as in 1830 when a batch of Indian labour was exported to Isle de Bourbon, a French colony. The year 1834 which went down as a triumphant year in the history of mankind when slavery in the British colonies was abolished opened the floodgate of this great exodus. Between 1834 and 1837 above 17,000 Indian labourers were sent out of the country.

‘The stream of migration of Indian workers overseas may be regarded as the first exodus of Indian labour from the fields to organized industry.’¹

Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica islands were famous for sugar production. The sugar plantations and mills of these islands employed slave labour. After the abolition of slave trade the freed slaves virtually refused to work in these plantations and mills. This led to a dearth of labour and consequential serious crisis for the sugar industries of those islands. Aided by the imperialist government, the sugar magnates then started importing from India landless and impoverished peasants in these colonies to work as labour.

These emigrant labourers could not, however, be termed as free labour in so far as they were not absolutely free on the question of selling their labour-power. They were indentured labourers. This system of indenture was identifiable neither with slavery nor with freedom. Rather, in fact, it was in between the two. These labourers were generally indentured for a term of five years and were provided with food, clothing, accommodation, medical treatment and a monthly wage.

The method of recruitment of these labourers was associated with indescribable horror. The European owners employed certain special types of men from amongst the inmates of the underworld of India to collect labourers from the rural areas. These men were popularly known as *Arkathis*. Recklessly having recourse to a variety of fraudulent practices and deceptions, these *Arkathis* lured the unemployed, landless, half-fed and half-naked rural masses for migrating from India. Having secured the signed contract, these unfortunate men and women were used to be brought mainly to Calcutta and also to Bombay, Madras and some ports of India under French possession. Under armed guard they were kept huddled in godowns of these ports before being sailed out of India. In later days, they were exported not only to the sugar colonies but to other places as well.

Available statistics show that by 1870 more than half a million labourers—men and women and children collected from various parts of the country were thus exported from India. The total number of these emigrants and their distribution to several colonies between 1842 and 1870 were as follows:²

Colony	Male	Female	Children	Total
Mauritius	243,853	63,459	44,089	351,401
British Guiana	53,323	16,983	9,385	79,691
Trinidad	28,030	9,280	5,209	42,519
Jamaica	10,169	3,233	1,914	15,169
To Br. West Indies colonies and St. Croix			...	7,021
To French colony Reunion			...	15,005
To French West Indian colonies			...	16,341
To Natal in South Africa			...	6,448
				533,595

By the end of nineteenth century, the number of emigrant

Indian labour rose to seven million. Though with a retarded pace, the process continued till 1917.

In the seventies and eighties of nineteenth century several Agency Houses sprouted out all over India for recruiting such labour. There being hard competition between one centre and another for recruitment, more and more hapless men fell victim to the sheer lies and deceitful artifices of the unscrupulous *Arkathis*. These *Arkathis* and other persons connected with this 'coolie trade' used to make a large fortune.

One typical example of these sham tricks will show how men were recruited. One Hurry Biswal gives the following evidence:³

I am a native of Cuttack. Four persons including myself were on our way to Calcutta where we expected to get some employment. On our way near Balasore, we put up one night at a sarai, and a person who had a badge on, put up in the same place with us and other travellers. The following morning we resumed our journey and the chaprassie, the man with the badge, proceeded on the road with us and entered into conversation with us. By and by he proposed that we should go with him to Calcutta and he would get us into service. He offered to procure me a situation of ten rupees per month in Mauritius which, he said, was a place only four days' journey from Calcutta, and that I would be at liberty to resign whenever I liked.

I accepted the offer believing the statement of the man with whom accordingly I came to Calcutta, and so did my companions. On our way he enjoined silence upon us, and told us not to tell any stranger whither we are going. When we arrived in Calcutta, we were taken to a house north of the town and there all of us were kept in one room, the door of which was always guarded by two or three men to prevent our egress. We were not permitted on any account to go out, and if ever did so it was under an escort.

We were so kept for about two weeks, after which we were taken to Bankshall to a gentleman to whom we were strictly enjoined to say 'Yes' to whatever he might ask us. When taken before this gentleman, I replied in the affirmative to the questions he put to me, and expressed my consent to go to Mauritius, still being ignorant as to what kind of place the Mauritius was or where it was, or that I should have to go thither in a ship.

Next I received a suit of clothes, a cap, a blanket, some brass utensils and also six rupees. Of this sum the duffadar's people took away four, a chest was bought for me with one, and the remaining rupee was appropriated to the purchase of sweetmeats, &c. After this I with the others were put on a dinghy, but I remonstrated, saying that I had been led to understand that the way to Mauritius was not by water. On this I was told, that we would

have only to cross the river. Instead of this, however, we were taken to a ship in the middle of the stream, and put on board with a great number more.

More, how these innocent victims were treated on board the ship during the long sea voyage was another pathetic story. A committee was set up by the government in 1838 to inquire into 'the Abuses alleged to exist in the Exportation of Hill coolies'. Some evidences before this Enquiry Committee as quoted below⁴ are revealing.

Captain James Rapson, Examined :

Q. In what ship did you take coolies to the Mauritius?

A. In the Sophia.

Q. What was her tonnage?

A. Her tonnage was 334 tons.

Q. How many coolies did you take in the Sophia?

A. We took down 366 men, women and children.

Q. How many did you land?

A. I landed 334 men, 10 women and 12 children ; we lost two overboard and eight by death ; they were all men ; two married men died.

Q. How many coolies fell overboard during the passage?

A. Four : two were saved and two drowned.

Captain F. W. Birch Examined :

Q. Are you aware whether there were many well-authenticated instances of kidnapping before the passing of the Act No. V of 1837?

A. There were instances ; I remember one particular instance of a woman who was made intoxicated, and shut up in a box ; they were carrying her across the esplanade, when she came to her senses, and she was rescinded ; I cannot particularize any more. Kidnapping prevailed in a very great degree in the lower provinces of Bengal.

Captain A. G. Mackenzie examined :

Q. What accommodation had they?

A. They had nearly the whole 'tween decks allowed them ; about 10 feet was occupied by gunny bales and some cases of goods.

Q. What allowance of water had they?

A. On each trip they had six pints of water ; but on the second occasion I was obliged three or four days to put them on four and a half pints.

- Q. How many meals had they each day?
 A. They ate but once a day.
 Q. Were any complaints made to you by any of the coolies during the two voyages, of their having been beaten by the officers under your command?
 A. I do not remember.
 Q. Were any of them punished by your order?
 A. Yes.
 Q. To what mode of punishment did you resort?
 A. I ordered them to be beaten with a ratton.
 Q. Did you ever specify the number of strokes to be inflicted?
 A. Yes.
 Q. Who inflicted the punishment?
 A. Their own Sirdars.

After taking a host of evidences this official Committee came to certain conclusions which amply confirm the gross crimes and barbarities connected with this coolie export business. Further, the slave-like plight of the coolies in the overseas islands is also confirmed by the report. Some relevant passages of the report are reproduced below.⁵

11. That the coolies seem generally to have been induced, by the duffadars and others employed in that business, to come to Calcutta by being persuaded that they should find employment as peons under the Company, works on the public roads or as gardeners, porters &c.

14. That kidnapping prevailed to a very considerable extent; and the coolies, while kept in Calcutta itself and its neighbourhood, were actually in a state of imprisonment.

15. That, notwithstanding the existence of these practices of kidnapping and illegal imprisonment to a very great extent within local limits of Calcutta itself, the police authorities of the town do not seem to have been well-informed of the facts; and it is certain that whatever measures were adopted, such measures were completely ineffectual as a check upon these abuses.

19. It further appears . . . that the regulations of the plantations are such as closely resemble imprisonment within their boundaries, and that the magistrates of the interior are not very cordially disposed to enforce those provisions of the contract inserted for the advantage of the coolie.

21. The hardships and miseries endured by the coolies in the passage to Mauritius are proved to have been very great; the mortality from drowning and other causes was most serious.

These evidences and conclusions are sufficient to show what bestial treatments were meted out to these Indian labourers by the European planters and the so-called coolie merchants.

This cruel exploitation and barbarities perpetrated upon them evoked deep resentment amongst the informed Indian people. Many in England were also resentful.

Bombay Gazette of 15 June 1938 painfully wrote,⁶ ' . . . these poor deluded men are seduced from their homes under the pretext of an engagement. They are shipped off to their destination, and from that moment they are more under the domination of the taskmaster than if they had been born in slavery. They are carried to a colony in which slavery has been abolished, and they become slaves.'

'*Somprakash*', a contemporary Bengali weekly published from Calcutta carried a series of write-ups against this system. When the government introduced a bill to exercise control over migration of labour it wrote,⁷ 'Each year 20,000 men are migrating India. Many of them die on the way. Those who ultimately reach their destination after undergoing immense sufferings during the journey, in many respects they have to remain as slaves.'

'To remain indifferent even after listening to their distress will mean only cruelty.'

Besides critical writings in the journals, the citizens of Calcutta in a meeting held on 10 July 1938 recorded their strong disapproval of this indenture system. The resolution passed in the meeting stated:⁸

'It feels bound solemnly to declare its deliberate conviction that the hill coolies and other natives of India who are induced to emigrate do not understand, and are not capable of understanding, the terms of the contract into which they are said to enter . . .'

Huddled like cattle in the heavily loaded cargo ships, maltreated, underfed, and receiving no medical attention, these ill-fated labourers, a section of them dying on the way, when reached their destination felt completely exhausted and shattered. To adjust themselves to the strange environments of these colonies was also an ordeal to them.

The condition of service of these labourers in the colonies

was simply wretched. Daily working period varied generally between 12 and 13 hours. But labour being extremely arduous in the sugar plantations and mills, mostly they had to work even in the night to complete their task. Losing heart and completely fatigued they returned home late at night. During that of slavery, the overseer kept a constant watch on them while at work in the fields, or in the mills. Even on Sundays they were burdened with some jobs. In some of the colonies they had to work even up to 18 hours a day. This excessively hard work was responsible for high rate of mortality among them.

The labourers were not allowed egress, lest they be organized. For insubordination they were caned. Even the diseased and physically handicapped ones were forcibly made to work. Thus the treatment meted out to them by the European owners hardly differed from that meted out to the slave-labour.

These primitive measures could not, however, always claim unwavering loyalty from the immigrant Indian labour. There are instances when they organized themselves and struck back. In one of the plantations of British Guiana, the Devonshire castle, the labourers marched to Georgetown to put their case before the higher authorities. 'But the labourers in turn met a brutal police attack on them, five died in police firing, nine were wounded and many were arrested.'⁹

The life and struggle of these exploited and oppressed immigrant Indian labourers no doubt constitute an inseparable component of the history of Indian labour.

Plantation Labour :

Beginning of plantation industry in India dates back to early nineteenth century. But towards the end of the eighteenth century, under the influence of European enterprise, production of indigo began to develop in India, with its centre in Bengal. Indigo plantations greatly flourished in nineteenth century before it was crushed by synthetic dyes. In 1831 it was said that between 500 and 1,000 Europeans were connected with the business and there were then 300 to 400 indigo factories in Bengal.¹⁰ But this plantation being mainly of the character of agricultural operations and ryots, the labour force connected

with it having belonged to the community of peasantry, fall beyond the scope of this volume.

Besides two other plantations Coffee and Rubber, Tea is the principal plantation industry in India and the conditions of labourers in the early period of this principal plantation industry relate a woeful tale of suffering humanity in colonial India.

Although production of tea was an unknown art to both Europeans and Indians, around 1815 China Tea Trade was a major source of profits of the East India Company. But the removal of the Company's monopoly of the China Trade in 1833 induced the Company for introduction of tea culture in India. In 1838 the first Indian tea was marketed in London and in 1839 a large company, The Assam Company, was formed in that city with a capital of £200,000 for growing tea in India. A great extension of tea planting followed, the principal development being in Assam and in the neighbourhood of Darjeeling in Bengal.

Regular production of tea may be taken to have been started since 1851 and by 1869 the industry got firmly established in the country.

Millions of agricultural labourers rendered surplus by the decaying agrarian economy of India formed the source of supply of labour force for this developing industry. The type of labour organization under which tea has been produced and the method of recruitment bear marked similarities with that of overseas sugar plantations. Tea plantations being laid out in new and undeveloped regions, it was necessary to bring labourers from the more populous districts, usually hundreds of miles away. The *Sirdar* or the foreman of the garden secured labourers through numerous local agents and the methods and practices they followed for the purpose were almost as fraudulent as that prevailed with recruitment of immigrant labourers. In the Darjeeling district, local agricultural labourers and those from Nepal furnished a sturdy and tractable labouring force, but in Assam outsiders were mainly used. Aboriginal tribes and people from Bihar, the then United Provinces and the Central Provinces were imported. Whole families came under contract really being indentured. The contracts were signed usually for three years and the monthly

wages in the early period ranged from Rs. 2 to Rs. 5 per person. Wages in this early period were affected by the building of railways and other public works as well as by the opening up of the country to money economy. In 1857 a labourer could be secured at Rs. 2½ per month but this soon rose to Rs. 4 and more.¹¹

Impelled by the pinch of poverty, the destitute rural masses fell into the clutches of the unscrupulous recruiting agents, and so glaring were the abuses that even the colonial government had to appoint a commission to study the situation. In consequence, an Act was passed in 1863 mainly purporting to provide that the coolies understood what they were undertaking and to reduce the formidable mortality on the long journey to the gardens. The Act was, however, an absolute failure for both the purposes. The Assam Labour and Immigration Act, 1901 enjoined that the *Sirdars* should be employees of the Tea Estates and the local agents should also have licences for recruiting labour. Despite this enactment, mischievous practices continued unabated. Moreover, according to certain provisions of the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act and Indian Penal Code desertion by the workers was considered to be criminal offence and the same acts empowered the employers to imprison the labourers and inflict punishment on them for such offence. All these together, reduced the plantation labourers virtually to a state of slavery. A prolonged movement, however, ultimately succeeded in amending these acts nullifying these draconian provisions.

With the extension of the plantations, the number of labourers engaged in this industry recorded a considerable increase. In the coffee plantations in 1903, the number of workers stood at 82,000. In the tea plantations it was much more and the following table will show the rate of increase of these labourers.¹²

Increasing Number of Workers in Indian Tea Industry

Year		Permanent	Temporary	Total
1895	...	450,926	102,895	553,811
1919	...	900,695	72,660	973,355
1928	...	831,438	75,349	906,787

Out of these 906,787 labourers in 1928, 544,193 were employed in Assam, 185,399 in Bengal and the rest in the southern part of India and elsewhere.

These plantations were entirely monopolized by the British capitalists and they extorted a fabulous fortune through brutal exploitation of the labourers. No moral scruple deterred them or their *Sirdars* in resorting to all sorts of heinous methods in securing, torturing and exploiting the labourers—whether male, female or tender-aged child. The most sorry part of it is that this occurred with the veiled and sometimes unveiled connivance of the colonial administration itself. For instance, the British planters considered securing groups of married couple more profitable than securing unrelated men and women. The *Sirdars* at once secured through reckless dupery and coercive intoxication such men and women and forced them to live as couple who were not at all wedded pairs.

Thus secured and virtually kept imprisoned in the tea gardens, these unfortunate labourers had to undergo untold miseries. The barbarities perpetrated upon them were conceivable only in a colonial regime. The Plantation Act, 1870 provided for nine hours' labour for both men and women. The Act prohibited employment of child labour below 16 years. But in actual practice these provisions were contemptuously flouted. Most deplorable condition of housing even for their meagre standards, extreme scarcity and dearness of food in those distant and unsettled regions, unbelievably low standard of wages combined with the arduous nature of work brought horrors to their life. Undernourishment and disease, working upon an originally poor health, quite incapacitated many coolies and condemned them to a formidable rate of mortality. In addition, recalling those in the age of slavery, flogging and other sorts of physical torture being common irrespective of men, women and child, the labourers on many occasions undertook to run away.

But the planter who has invested a large sum in securing a man and through whose toil he wants to multiply his profits, cannot allow the coolie to run away. And so,

'*Chowkeydars* (Guards) were posted at every possible outlet from the cooly lines, which in some instances were enclosed by high palisades, outside which the coolies were not allowed

at night. A reward of Rs. 5 was given to anyone catching a runaway cooly, and the dislike felt by the native population to the foreigners (the imported labourers) was enlisted as well as their avarice. The savage hillmen were in special request to track out fugitives . . . If the coolies were caught they were tied up and flogged, and the reward paid to their capturers was deducted by way of fine from their future earnings.¹³

But the coolies were surrounded not only by guards and savage trackers but also by long stretches of impenetrable jungle infested by ferocious beasts and deadly reptiles.

Cruelties perpetrated upon the coolies, not infrequently resulted fatally. Referring to a case in which a labourer was flogged to death, a government spokesman of Assam holding the high office of Commissioner candidly wrote,¹⁴ 'In Assam the life of a coolie hangs at best by a slender thread; with a climate that so saps his vitality, it unfortunately takes very little to kill him; and the shock of such a flogging as would be elsewhere borne with impunity might there prove fatal.'

The situation hardly improved even at the turn of the century. Dewan Chaman Lall cites many instances of brutalities committed during the first quarter of this century.¹⁵ A few of those are enough to expose the ghastly character of colonial exploitation.

A female labourer, at the expiry of her contract on 20 July 1920, applied to the Deputy Commissioner for a discharge certificate. This enraged the Manager who sued the woman in a court of law on the charge of desertion in consequence of which she was convicted with rigorous imprisonment for six months.

A batch of 20 labourers, on expiry of their contract for one year on 1 June 1928, applied to the Deputy Commissioner for arranging passage money for returning home. The result was: they were told that their contract was for two years and they would have to work for another 11 months. Thus through sheer deception, they were made to work like slaves for 11 months more after which completely empty-handed, they set out for their native place 2,000 miles away. But what happened to their fate, nobody knew—the official report subsequently admitted.

Verana Tilanga, a labourer was arrested while going to another garden as a suspect Trade Union Congress man and

was tried on 15 August 1928 and sentenced to one month's rigorous imprisonment.

A labourer, Dasarath was beaten to death, but the official inquest said 'his spleen automatically gave away at the gentle touch of a European Planter.'

Even the women were not spared. A coolie woman Sukhrumani was brutally done to death by a white planter. In 1928, a coolie was beaten out of the garden, robbed of his belongings, but his wife was not allowed to go with him.

A British Trade Union delegation consisting of Messrs. Purcell and Hallsworth who visited India in 1928 and prepared a report on the condition of the Indian workers, caustically observed, 'Virtually slave, Plantation workers of Assam are perhaps the most wretched species of humanity that are to be found in the civilized world.'

But the savagery committed upon these tea plantation labourers could not but deeply wound the feelings of the Indian people. The native press had taken up the issue and unequivocally condemned the white planters right from the time of introduction of tea plantation. Since as back as 1862, the leading Bengali weekly *Somprakash* in a series of articles started exposing these barbarities. Another periodical '*Dacca Prakash*' contemporarily published from Dacca, however, pioneered the protest.

With deep anxiety, *Somprakash* quoted *Dacca Prakash*,¹⁶ 'For some time different newspapers had been agitating upon the oppressions committed by the tea planters of Cachhar. Then the Tea planters assumed a little peaceable attitude. But now again, day by day, they are becoming fiercer.' *Somprakash* thereafter pungently observed,¹⁷ 'Previously tea planters paid Rs. 2½ only to the labourer as monthly wages, gradually the wages rose up to Rs. 4½ a month, . . . Is it not an oppression to force them work at meagre wages who are actually entitled to a higher sum? . . . Is it all lies what the Cachhar correspondent of *Dacca Prakash* has so long been writing about these oppressions committed by the tea planters? . . . Because of the contract, the labourers will never tolerate ill-treatment.' Reminding the British tea planters the consequences of these barbarities, the paper boldly asserted, 'We again warn the tea planters not to follow the footsteps of the indigo planters . . .

If they continue this oppression like the indigo planters for some time more, they will have to quit India.'

Similar reports were published in another Bengali periodical *Sanjibanee* and a leading English daily *The Bengalee* published from Calcutta. These heart-rending stories about the tea garden labourers could not but move the enlightened community of Bengal. About 1880 Indian Association of Calcutta deputed Mr. Dwarkanath Ganguly, Assistant Secretary of the Association for investigation into the condition of the coolies. After an on-the-spot investigation in Assam, Mr. Ganguly contributed a series of articles in *The Bengalee* vividly exposing the wretched condition of the tea garden labourers.

These remonstrances led the government to institute a Labour Inquiry Committee in the year 1921. That this Committee was a hoax was clear from its very constitution. It comprised five planters, one medical practitioner and two government officials. The most interesting part of it is that, this Committee did not take any evidence from the labourers in compliance of a resolution passed by the Indian Tea Association asking its members not to make any personal contact with the coolies. The Dooars Committee of 1910 actually set the precedent in this matter although adducing different reasons. Its report stated,¹⁸ 'The Committee thought that no useful object would be served by recording formally the statement of coolie witnesses. Any coolie brought up to give evidence before a number of strange Europeans would inevitably become frightened and confused and no information of value was likely to be obtained in that way.'

Thus these Committees and 'Inquiries' were instituted by the colonial government nothing but as smoke-screens to allow the greedy British planters perpetrate their criminal treatment with the coolies and exploit them insensibly.

The intensity of exploitation aided by the war-time boom secured the industry sky-high profits ranging in some cases up to 450 per cent. Despite these fabulous profits not a single farthing was added to the wages of the labourers. But when a slump followed at the end of the war, the planters wanted the labourers not to receive any wages but only a reduced allowance. Even the full amount of wages was far from sufficient

for the labourers to keep body and soul together, and that already meagre wages were now reduced to 3 pie a day!

In the latter half of 1920 and the beginning of 1921, the economic condition of the plantation workers assumed serious proportions. The cost of living rose very high and there was almost a universal demand for increase of wages. The first signs of unrest appeared on 6 September 1920 when the labourers of a garden of Doom-Dooma company refused to work in protest against supply of bad and insufficient rice. The unrest spread and led to some clashes in Lakhimpur district.

Thus the endurance of the labourers was coming to an end. In 1921, when the entire country was being flushed by the wave of non-co-operation movement against the imperialist government, thousands of tea plantation labourers also decided to get out of this slavery and return home. As Dewan Chaman Lall has put it,¹⁹ 'They had seen men, women and children flogged and savagely dealt with. they had borne with untold cruelties and suffered untold privations, they would not return, they were determined.'

Referring to this strike of the labourers and their decision to return home, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* piquantly observed:²⁰

The strike of the coolies of the tea gardens of Assam is really a revolt against age-long tyranny and exploitations to which they have been the most hapless victims. From the time the coolie falls into the hands of the artful recruiter, the *arkati* as he is popularly called, till he finds his resting place in his grave away from his native home, his life is one long drawn-out misery. And not only men but women and children have the same story to tell . . . The moment the helpless coolie passed into the gardens it was felt that he was lost to civilization and humanity. He had fallen into conditions from which it seemed no earthly power could rescue him. The Assam coolie has thus been outside the scheme of regeneration of Christian missionaries and politicians alike. But his redemption has at last come. From whom? Not from any outside agency but from himself. He is determined to break the shackles for ever or die in the attempt.

Dr. Rajani Kanta Das while discussing the background of the strike of the coolies, mentioned that the kicks, blows and various other sorts of physical torture committed on the labourers by the European officers frequently created a state of clash in the tea estates. According to his calculation 106 cases of such rioting occurred in the gardens in 1891 alone.²¹

These clashes occurred, in fact, in the nature of resistance

by the labourers against the oppression of the European planters. This spirit of resistance developed among the labourers right from the year 1884. To analyze it precisely, what were in actual practice trade disputes, turned into riotings in the absence of organized leadership among the coolies. During 1902-03, 82 labourers were convicted on the charge of such 'riotings'. But the atrocities were so rampant, that in spite of inflicting punishment upon the coolies, the official report could not altogether hide the crimes of the European officers. The Report on Labour Immigration into Assam for 1899 noted with dismay,²² 'The Chief Commissioner is not so sanguine as to look forward to the day when Englishmen will altogether abandon the regrettable habit of giving a cuff or even a kick or blow with a cane to natives of the labouring classes.' The same report further observed,²³ 'There was a growing tendency among the coolie class to resent a blow by striking a blow in return, and this soon leads to serious results, as coolies act in combination among them and are armed with formidable weapons—the implements of their industries; but this very tendency exercises a healthy influence in restraining the hot-headed and impetuous European assistants from raising their heads against them.'

Development of trade union consciousness and organization among the tea plantation workers was a comparatively delayed phenomenon. Horrid isolation far from their homes, their ignorance, want of education, and difficulty of contact with the outside political and trade union workers, added with sharp vigil and revengeful attitude of the employers against any attempt for combination were factors responsible for this delayed process. Yet their elementary passion for resistance against exploitation, humiliation, physical torture, and many other sorts of sadism committed by the British planters matured in gradual course into a higher consciousness to safeguard their interests collectively.

Their collective abstention from work and their determined decision to abandon the tea gardens as happened in May 1921 actually climaxed the manifestation of this consciousness. Simultaneously, however, there were numerous cases of rioting and during 1921-22, 96 coolies were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment, the figure for 1925-26 being 24.

Eight thousand coolies, in a group, left work and set out for their far away native places at United Provinces, Madras and elsewhere. But what betook them in their long trek is a story of downright brutality—once again exhibiting the ugly face of a colonial administration.

Gravely alarmed at this *en masse* desertion, the planters and the administration conjointly hatched up devilish means to foil this desertion. The European officers of the Railways at Karimgunge ordered not to issue tickets to the coolies who then decided to start on foot. However, with the intervention of Mr. J. M. Sengupta, the then Mayor of Calcutta and an eminent political leader, tickets were issued. But as soon as the coolies reached Chandpur, they were illegally detained. On 17 May 1921, 1000 coolies boarded the train at Gualando, but the District Magistrate of Faridpur detrained them on the plea of orders to this effect from the higher authorities. They were kept confined throughout the night in the Station platform under armed escort and next day they were allowed by the District Magistrate to proceed towards Kusthia. On the way, a number of them died of cholera, exhaustion and want of food. The government officials and the police authorities tried to allure them back to work proposing to raise their wages to 6 annas a day, but the coolies refused.

Another batch of 3000 coolies were detained at Chandpur Railway Station. Barbarities perpetrated upon them find no parallel. Failing to persuade them back to work, the authorities had taken recourse to an atrocious operation. In the midnight of 20 May 1921 when the coolies—men, women and children were deeply asleep, by order of the Divisional Commissioner, armed Gorkha soldiers commanded by the British officers suddenly pounced upon them and mercilessly bayonnetted. Old men and women or the mothers with suckling babies—none was spared. Many were even thrown into the river and killed.

The only 'offence' of the coolies was their determination to get out of slavery and return home. And this ghastliness shows how befittingly this 'offence' was avenged by the colonial government. On receiving the news of this butchery, when the people of Chandpur town tried to come forward to rescue the helpless victims, they were obstructed. But the anger of the people burst out in Bengal. The people of Chandpur observed com-

plete strike which soon spread out to neighbouring areas. The lawyers of Iswargunge and Netrokona also observed strike. General strike was observed at Silchar and Khalia. The people of Barisal, Sylhet and Dacca too joined the protest agitation. But the most remarkable protest action was resorted to by the employees and workers of Assam-Bengal Railway. They struck work and the entire railway came to a dead halt.

The British Government blamed non-co-operation movement as the cause of this large-scale desertion by the coolies. By this they tried to conceal the limitless exploitation and ill-treatment which exhausted the patience of the coolies. Dewan Chaman Lall challenged the official version and asserted,²⁴ 'The causes were not political—all the loud-mouthed blusterings of officials and of the capitalist press and of the hired scribes could not make it so. The causes were purely economic, in a word, starvation and ill-treatment.' The fact is that the resistance of the coolies that had been developing so long against the inhuman treatment and exploitation, found favourable circumstances in the non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 and burst forth in the form of strike and mass desertion. The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22, though willy-nilly, had also to admit this fact. The report stated,²⁵ ' . . . They cannot believe that the Exodus would have taken the form it did, that the coolies would have deserted the estates *en masse*, had it not been for the speeches delivered at the political meetings in the vicinity, *which gave the final impetus to discontent engendered by conditions prevailing on the plantations.*' (emphasis added).

In course of time, these oppressed tea plantation workers in Assam and Bengal got organized into trade unions and their working and living conditions also changed considerably. But remaining far away from modern industrial centres, they were very slow to imbibe the outlook and attitude of the modern proletariat and the degree of their class consciousness in most cases, is still comparatively low. This facilitated the induction of reformist trade unionism among them, vestiges of which are still largely found especially in Assam.

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BEGINNING OF WORKING-CLASS MOVEMENT 1850-1900

Social Background :

THE growing conflict of interests between the newborn Indian bourgeoisie and the imperialist administration at the latter part of the nineteenth century provided the background for the birth of Indian National Congress in 1885. It was no mere accident that personalities like Mr. W. C. Bonerjee and Mr. Dadabhai Naorojee who came from the highest stratum of the then Indian society were at the helm of this organization. Representatives of the rising Indian bourgeoisie were the men who joined and conducted the business of this organization at its early phase. Conflicting interest of British and Indian capital and the aspirations of the educated middle class yet in a formative stage, acted as the prime-mover of Indian National Congress. Strict limitation of the resolutions adopted in the inaugural and subsequent few sessions of the Congress within the narrow periphery of Indian representation in Legislative Council, holding Civil Service examination in India simultaneously, separation of judiciary from the executive and similar other matters are attributable to this very class character of the organization.

Indian Nationalism thus germinated centring round the Congress and the educated rich. Congress had no programme to organize the peasantry, though they constituted more than 80 per cent of the population. The working class, that started emerging as a new social force, did not either engage the attention of the Congress.

Capitalism and its grave-diggers are born simultaneously—said Marx. And it is the working class that digs the grave of capitalism. Thus the problem of the working class, although, did not find any place in the programme of Congress, the

dynamism of history itself impelled the working class to stand as a class by itself in the arena of struggle. It was, however, a historical inevitability of colonial India that, born out of the impoverished rural masses with the concomitant weaknesses and initially meagre in number and pressed under inhuman living and working conditions, the working class of India took a considerably long time to get class-conscious and consolidated. This resulted in the working class trailing behind the bourgeoisie at the initial phase of the national movement, the far-reaching effect of which became more conspicuous in later days.

Subsequent to the great revolt of 1857, the country passed through a series of peasant uprisings. The revolts of the ryots of Indigo plantation, the Santals, the peasantry of Maharashtra and the Moppalas of Malabar coast were of remarkable significance. These revolts though scattered and unconnected, moved the Indian people to a not inconsiderable extent. One can find the imprint of these revolts even in contemporary Bengali literature. The Bengali playwright Mr. Dinabandhu Mitra in his famous play *Nil Darpan* (Indigo Mirror) published from Dacca in 1860, depicted the revolt of the oppressed ryots with great artistic skill and human sympathy. The realism displayed by him in representing the firmness and heroism of the revolting peasant in face of untold horrors and cruelties could not but highly impress and move the Bengalee people.

The Indian proletariat was born in such a historical phase of the country and it is no exaggeration to say that right from the moment of its birth it had to move along the tortuous path of protest and conflict.

The character of these elementary struggles was, however, absolutely scattered and unorganized. In this preliminary phase the workers possessed no trade union in the true sense of the term. Subsequently, in course of growing experiences and advancement of struggle of the mass of workers, the trade unions started springing up. But the consciousness of the workers till then was purely elementary. However, the world-wide awakening that followed the first Imperialist War in 1914-18, the great impact of the Russian Socialist Revolution, the wave of strike-struggles of the proletariat particularly in Europe as an after-math of the devastating war, created favourable ground for and gave rise to a conscious and organized trade

union movement in India. Since then, the working-class movement of India had been steadily gaining both in organized strength and consciousness. With the attainment of political independence in 1947 the working-class movement of India embarked upon an altogether different phase with a new and higher perspective set before it. The present period is therefore the period of a fast developing movement of a politically mature Indian working class heading towards a revolutionary objective.

Following this course of evolution, the Indian working-class movement may be divided in four broad phases—the first phase from 1850 to 1900 as the inception of the working-class movement; the second from 1901-1914 as the phase witnessing the formative process of the trade unions and the third from 1915 to 1947 as the phase of developing consciousness and organized trade union and political movement of the working class. Up to this, the working class of India along with its economic struggles have marched forward with the political perspective of national liberation. The fourth and the present post-independence phase is characterized by a highly organized economic and political struggle of the working class with higher political vision in an absolutely altered political situation.

First Phase of Struggle :

The heart-rending condition of the newly born Indian working class engaged the attention of some educated philanthropists and social workers. None of them was an agitator or more precisely, none of them either had any conception about it. But moved by the spirit of social service and a sense of sympathy, they tried to reveal before the government and the public the sorry plight of the workers. Simultaneously they also embarked upon issuing one or other journal for publicizing the problems and difficult conditions of the workers. To impart primary education to the illiterate and ignorant workers, they also conducted certain night schools and other such institutions. All these had commenced before the birth of the Indian National Congress.

In Bengal a section of the educated gentry came forward for the purpose. Foremost among them was Mr. Sashipada Banerjee, a member of the Brahmo Samaj, who in 1874 published a Bengali monthly journal entitled *Bharat Sramajibi*

(Indian Worker) from Baranagar near Calcutta to voice the problems of the workers and also to educate them. According to the best available information, this was the first published journal in India devoted to the problems and interests of the workers. Mr. Narayan Meghajee Lokhunday of Bombay also published another journal entitled *Dinabandhu* (Friend of the Poor) with the same purpose, but it came out in 1898. Before starting publication of the journal, Mr. Sashipada Banerjee founded 'Workingmen's Club' in 1870, which was most probably the first of its kind in India.

In 1878 Brahmo Samaj of Calcutta founded the 'Working Men's Mission' with the objective of preaching religious morality, etc. among the workers and other men of the undeveloped community. Impelled by this socio-religious spirit, Mr. Sashipada Banerjee took initiative in establishing in 1880 the 'Baranagar Institute' in the vicinity of Calcutta for spreading primary education among the industrial labourers. Then in 1884 Brahmo Samaj started night school and Savings bank for the jute-mill workers of Baranagar and Mr. Banerjee was placed in charge of these establishments. In 1872, Mr. P. C. Majumdar, another propagandist of Brahmo Samaj of Bengal founded eight night schools in the working-class areas of Bombay for spreading education among the workers.¹

Judging from the point of view of the first attempt to enlighten the workers, of espousing their cause and of publication of the first workers' journal, the credit of being the pioneer in philanthropic service to Indian workers within the historical limitations of that period may fairly go to Mr. Sashipada Banerjee. In 1871 he visited England, where on different occasions he talked about the plight of the Indian toilers.

Concurrently with this initiative in Bengal, in Maharashtra also several philanthropists and social workers came forward to serve the interests of the workers. Attempts made by Mr. Sorabjee Shapurjee Bengalee in ameliorating the conditions of cotton-mill labourers of Bombay around 1878 have already been referred to. Especially remarkable was the attempt of Mr. Narayan Meghajee Lokhunday of Bombay in actively taking up the cause of the textile workers. In 1884 he convened a meeting of the mill workers of Bombay to discuss their problems and to prepare a memorandum. In 1890 he founded the

'Bombay Mill-hands Association' and became its president. Some have erroneously viewed 'Bombay Mill-hands Association' as the first trade union of India and Mr. Lokhunday as the first trade union organizer. 'Bombay Mill-hands Association' possessed no characteristics of a trade union organization. It had neither any membership and fund nor any constitution. And Mr. Lokhunday came forward to the service of the workers not with any trade union consciousness but with a spirit of social service and sympathy with the lot of the workers. Though actively devoted to the cause of the workers, he could not escape the historical limitations of that period. His name will thus go in history as one of the foremost philanthropists and promoters of labour welfare and not as a trade union leader.

The observation of Mr. J. M. Campbell, Revenue Collector of Bombay in regard to the character of Bombay Mill-hands' Association and the role played by Mr. Lokhunday throws some light on the existing situation. He said,² 'The Bombay mill-hands have no organized trade union. Mr. N. M. Lokhunday, who worked on the last Factory Commission, describes himself as President of the Bombay Mill-hands' Association. That Association has no existence as an organized body, had no roll of membership, no funds, and no rules. I understand that Mr. Lokhunday simply acts as voluntary adviser to any mill-hand who may come to him.' The comments of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Bombay, further clarifies the situation. He said,³ 'The so-called association of the mill-hands has hardly any influence over the masses to make the combination of the mill-hands powerful enough to cope with the employers for years to come. This is a kind of association, a factor which can hardly influence the relation between the employers and the employed in any way, at least for the present.' But according to Mr. Lokhunday's version,⁴ 'Many mill-hands are unwilling to be known as connected with our Association for fear of losing their employment, so jealous are the employers of labour here of any combination among the workers for their mutual benefit.' Despite the truth underlying Mr. Lokhunday's statement, official version fairly represents the actual state of affairs then existing.

However, in the meeting convened by Mr. Lokhunday on

23 and 26 September 1884, a memorandum incorporating the following demands was prepared.⁵

1. That all mill-hands be allowed one complete day of rest every Sunday.
2. That half an hour's recess be allowed to them at noon.
3. That work in mills should commence at 6-30 A.M. and close at sunset.
4. That the payment of wages should be made not later than the 15th of the month following that for which they have been earned.
5. That a workman sustaining serious injury in the course of his work at the mill, which might disable him for the time being, should receive full-wages until recovery and that in case of his being maimed for life, suitable pension should be made for his livelihood.'

This memorial was signed by 5,500 workers and submitted to the Commission of 1884 appointed by the Government of Bombay.

Ten thousand workers joined and two female workers addressed the subsequent meeting convened by Mr. Lokhunday on 24 April 1890. 'A memorial asking for a weekly holiday was drawn and sent to the Bombay Mill Owners' Association, which granted the request in the general meeting held on June 10, 1890. It was a victory but without legal compulsion, it could not be enforced.'⁶

In 1892 Mr. Lokhunday sent a letter through the Chief Factory Inspector of Bombay replying to the questionnaire circulated by the Royal Commission on Labour of Great Britain. That letter is an exposition of the condition of the workers vis-à-vis the attitude of the government in that period. The character of the Indian labour as depicted in that letter to which a modern observer of Indian labour movement cannot, however, agree, is noteworthy. The letter, in that way, is also a reflection of the attitude and the way of thinking of the promoters of labour welfare in that period. Though a bit lengthy, reproduction of some relevant portions of the letter seems pertinent. The letter says:⁷

The Indian mill-hands are a law abiding and a peaceable race, and as a rule, more prone to suffer patiently under wrong than to seek it righted, or to dispute the authority of their employers. If, therefore, the employers observed strictly the factory laws, and only paid them regularly exactly the sum due for their labour and reduced their wages only when necessary, and that after a proper timely notice beforehand, and conceded some of the points touched in my

replies above, there is no reason why the most cordial relationship should not subsist between the employers and the employed in this country.

The mill-hands of the country, notwithstanding the roseate accounts given by the interested parties of their prosperity, are as a class not at all thriving, owing to their extreme ignorance and addiction to the vices of a city life, specially drink. Primary education assisted by occasional payment of honorarium for good behaviour and efficiency in service, will go a good way forward ameliorating their condition . . . An uniform 11 hour's work per diem is another, much needed reform for the consideration of the Commission.

With the same spirit, a Seamen's Club was formed in Bombay under the auspices of Rev. Father Hopkins and J. Henson, who had been associated with National Sailors' Union and Firemen's Union of Great Britain and Ireland, respectively.⁸ This Association acted more or less like a clearing house for the grievances of the workers but did not possess the characteristics of modern trade union. Subsequently, many other organizations were formed by philanthropic men with a spirit of social service to the workers.

Thus side by side with a section of the intelligentsia becoming vocal against the sufferings and exploitation of the workers, with publication of a few journals espousing their cause and with a little spreading of primary education among them, the workers' actual struggles too, though in an isolated and scattered manner, started bursting out right from the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. Neither any organization nor any organized effort is noticeable behind these struggles. The inherent tendency of rebellion that lay dormant in the minds of the impoverished peasants and agricultural labourers who eventually turned into industrial workers, impelled them to such acts of resistance against capitalist exploitation in the modern factories. Collective working in the factories generated a mutual sympathy among them. Growth of a caste, racial and regional unity among the heterogeneous mass of workers also led them to collective resistance against capitalist exploitation.

The workers at the initial period, were dependent upon the 'jobber' who, as a general rule, recruited them from among his caste-fellows, often from his own native village. These 'jobbers' were employees of factories while they also earned money by extorting some kind of commission from the workers. The

group of workers under a jobber was bound by a loose occupational fraternity standing together through trouble and suffering.

These jobbers were mostly corrupt and wicked people. Clash of interests between the management and these men often led to their dismissal or inflicting some other punishments. In such an event the entire body of workers under the jobber were likely to refuse work. Besides personal relations, dependence of the workers on the jobber for security of job, promotion etc. was also responsible for such group action.

This state of affairs does not, of course, fully explain the causes of strikes at the initial period. In most cases, the workers spontaneously joined strikes and other actions on the basis of their own demands. But undoubtedly, the character of the strikes of that period was marked by a great deal of difference with that of the period of organized trade union movement. Characterizing those initial strikes, D. H. Buchanan observed,⁹ 'from the beginning there were loosely organized refusals to work.' The strikes were absolutely short-lived ending within a day or two or so. Sometimes, on any issue the entire factory did not go on strike while some departments did. Such disorganized character did not allow the strikes to be prolonged or decisive. In consequence, despite the workers' resistance, the employers were in no mood to settle their problems. Besides, the attitude of the workers was also a little different. In spite of working in factories, they could not as yet be accustomed to the new mode of life of industrial worker. Hesitant as they still were to accept this as a permanent profession, feeling particularly averse to low wages and long hours of work, their age-old habit of a rural life and the lure of a piece of land often beckoned them back to villages. And so, to leave the industrial centres for native villages after a short-lived resistance against inhuman exploitation was a frequent practice with many of them.

At the initial phase, the exorbitantly long hours of work and the miserably low wages were the two prongs of a trident that bruised the workers most. The restrictions provided by the First Factory Act of India in regard to employment of child labour remained ineffectual. Mr. N. M. Lokhunday organized workers' meeting in Bombay demanding one day's com-

pulsory rest in a week. This became a cause of unrest in almost all industrial centres. On 25 September 1890, the Government of India issued orders appointing Factory Labour Commission. Four Indian members *viz.* Mr. S. S. Bengalee and Mr. N. M. Lokhunday of Bombay, Babu Rashiklal Ghosh of Calcutta and Mr. Framji Mackenji, a foreman of Kanpur Woollen Mill were included in this Commission.

The recommendation of this Commission led to the legislation of Factory Act, 1891. The main provisions of this Act included: fixing daily 9 hours work for child labourers between 9 and 14 years, 11 hours work for female labourers, daily half-an-hour break for tiffin and one day's compulsory rest in a week. But noticeably, even this Act did not fix the hours of work for male labourers. Rather the Commission, in their own words, could not 'conceive of any conditions which can ever call for State interference in the matter.'¹⁰ Moreover, the provisions of this Act were practically ignored in most of the cases. Working hours of male labourers were recommended to be limited after long two decades when the Indian Factory Act of 1911 fixed the hours of work of the cotton mill workers to be 12 hours a day.

Pathetically meagre wages caused widespread discontent among the workers. But the shamelessly callous colonial government did not even think of appointing any Committee or Commission to go into this question. And in a competitive spree both the British and the Indian employers extorted maximum profits by paying the workers as low wages as possible. It was not therefore unnatural, in this condition, that the first effervescence of the struggles of the workers centred mainly round two basic demands—shortening the working hours and increase of wages.

The facts so far available from different sources show that the first strike of the industrial workers of India occurred in the newly introduced Railways. In April-May 1862, 1200 labourers of Howrah Railway Station took part in this strike on the demand of 8 hours work a day. Keeping in mind that the Railways in India were first introduced only in 1853, this strike of a section of the Railway workers within 8 or 9 years of the beginning of the industry cannot but evoke great admiration. Moreover, this strike of a contingent of the Indian workers

for 8 hours' work a day occurring 24 years in advance of the epoch-making May-Day performance of the Chicago workers is also an event of great historical interest.

Somprakash, the Bengali weekly published from Calcutta, carried the following news about the strike.¹¹

Recently 1200 workers of Howrah Railway Station have struck work. They say that the workers of Locomotive Department work 8 hours' a day. But they have to work 10 hours. Work has been stopped for some days. The Railway Company should fulfil the prayer of the workers, otherwise they won't get any man.

This strike must not, however, be construed as an instance of highly organized and class-conscious performance of the Indian working class. Coming as it did, in the absolute infancy of the Indian proletariat, it was associated with the inescapable shortcomings of that period, in respect of both organization and consciousness.

Prior to this strike, there were also cessations of work in Calcutta by the palanquin-bearers in 1823 and by the river-transport porters in 1853. Subsequently in September 1862, the coachmen of bullock-carts in Calcutta stopped work. Similarly, the meat-sellers under Bombay Municipal Corporation stopped work in 1866. At Ahmedabad also the tailors and brick-field labourers ceased work in 1873. But all these cessations of work by the toilers in different professions should not be confused with the strike of the modern industrial workers like the railway workers' strike in 1862.

Next to this, another big strike occurred in 1877 by the weavers of Nagpur Empress Mills on the issue of wage-rates.¹² Further details about this strike are not, however, available.

According to available records strikes occurred frequently and extensively since 1880 up to the end of the century. Reviewing the then existing labour conditions, Dr. R. K. Das, said,¹³ 'Between the years 1882 and 1890, there were 25 important strikes recorded in different factories of Bombay and Madras. But minor strikes were more frequent.' Pointing out the nature of the strikes, the Secretary of the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners' Association said,¹⁴ 'Whenever these slight strikes, as they may be called, take place, the invariable cause of these is fining on the part of the employers for bad work or attempting on the part of the employers to reduce their wages. But such disputes are always amicably settled.' The observation is con-

firmed by the statement of the Revenue Collector of Bombay. According to him,¹⁵ 'The hands occasionally stop away for a day or two, when fined for absence or bad work or when a reduction in wages is attempted . . .'

This is further confirmed by Mr. N. A. Moss, the Chief Inspector of Factories, Bombay, according to whom,¹⁶ 'Strikes have been many. Two should be put down every year for each factory, but all of them have been shortlived, and in the end it is always the operatives who has given in, in some cases with fines and in some cases with loss of arrears of wages. The reasons leading the men to strike are mostly temporary, reduction of wages without any notice whatsoever . . .'

This is again corroborated by another official of the Government of Bombay who said,¹⁷ 'Strikes and lock-outs in the sense known in England do not occur. . . In Bombay, such strikes as have occurred have been limited to single mills or departments of mills. They have not lasted over three days. The usual cause is said to have been the attempted reduction in the rates of wages.'

The labour condition of Bengal was also almost alike that of Bombay Presidency. One official spokesman of the Bengal Government stated,¹⁸ 'There have been no strikes or lock-outs of general interest or importance. Individual mills have had trouble when they have tried to reduce the rates of wages in any department in which the wages have been proportionately higher than in others, or higher than in neighbouring mills; and workers have, in a few cases, combined and refused to work under an overseer who has made himself obnoxious to them and in some cases there had been stoppage of work a week at a time. . . . An organized strike affecting the whole trade, or even all the workers in one mill, has never occurred. Whenever employers have come into collision with their employees, and have persevered in carrying out whatever alterations they had determined on, even against a strike of their workers, they have, it is believed, been uniformly successful.'

These statements submitted to the Royal Commission on Labour in Great Britain clearly indicate that whatever might be their character, strikes occurred fairly extensively during this period. Though not in a modern style and however loosely and temporarily it might be, there is no denying the fact that the

workers frequently stood up against intensification of exploitation in that early period. Another noteworthy feature was that the strikes occurred both in the British-owned and Indian-owned industries. Despite clashes of interest on various counts between the British and Indian industrialists, in respect of merciless exploitation of the Indian workers these two contending groups were absolutely at one.

However, in spite of their belittling efforts to certain extent, the government officials themselves admitted of different strike-actions by the workers in the two decades following 1880. From the facts and information lying scattered in different records and documents, if pieced together, the following list of major and minor strikes of this period broadly emerges out.

1. Two strikes occurred in Gulam Baba Spinning and Weaving Mills of Surat at the end of the year 1882. The first strike occurred in November 13 and 14 and the second on December 19 and 20. It is reported that a dispute between the manager of the mills and the workers caused both the strikes.¹⁹

2. A strike lasting for three days occurred in Swadeshi Mills at Kurla in 1887. Low wages of the workers caused this strike.²⁰

3. In the Ghosery Cotton Mills of Bengal there were two strikes—one in 1881 and the other in 1890. The former lasted for ten days and the latter for three days. According to official report, the cause of the strike was a reduction of wages but in both cases the employees ultimately accepted the terms offered, though the company stated that they lost Rs. 2,000 over the two strikes.²¹

4. In the Hinganghat Mill, Wardha, four strikes occurred during 10 years between 1881 and 1890, each strike costing the company about Rs. 1,000 a day. Following were the dates of the strikes.²²

First strike : December 26 to December 28, 1886.

Second strike : April 27 to April 29, 1887.

Third strike : March 26 to March 30, 1888.

Fourth strike : November 25 to November 28, 1889.

5. A strike occurred in Coimbatore Spinning and Weaving Mill from May 10 to May 12, 1891. 300 workers out of a total strength of 350 joined the strike. It is report-

ed that beating of a worker by the management caused the strike.²³

6. The management of Kurla Spinning and Weaving Mill reported that on an average one strike a year occurred in that mill from 1881 to 1887.²⁴

7. The management of Southern India Spinning and Weaving Company Ltd. Madras, reported that five strikes occurred in their mill during the period from 1881 to 1890, each strike costing the mill Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 3,000 on an average.²⁵

8. Nawrosjee Wadia & Sons, Bombay stated that two strikes occurred in that mill from 1881 to 1890 principally against curtailment of wages.²⁶

9. In October 1892, strike occurred in three mills under the management of K. M. Heeramanek & Co. of Bombay. It is reported that an apprehension of wage-reduction caused the strike which however, fizzled out lasting for a few days only. But soon the workers became prone to strike and in 1893 the biggest strike of the workers affected the mills. The management blamed the workers as suffering from 'strike-mania'.²⁷

10. Between 1892 and 1893 the cotton mill-owners of Bombay made a desperate attempt to reduce wages. Against this, the workers in different mills struck work and subsequently united strike of the workers of several mills also took place. This was the biggest strike of the workers during this period and 12,000 to 15,000 workers were involved in it.²⁸

11. According to official record, 8,000 workers of Ahmedabad struck work in February 1895 protesting against the decision of the Mill-Owners' Association to replace fortnightly payment system by a weekly one which was in vogue since the establishment of the first mill in Ahmedabad in 1869. The weavers of the mills were the first to come out followed by the others. The Presidency Inspector of Ahmedabad described this strike as one of the biggest. It lasted for 10 days and met an unsuccessful end.²⁹

12. The Director of Budge Budge Jute Mill reported under date line 13 October 1895 that they 'regret that a

strike among the workpeople, by which the mills were closed for nearly six weeks occurred during the half year', had cost the Company 80,000 rupees. Another strike stopped the mill for eight days in June 1896, and others occurred in both halves of the year 1900.³⁰

The first strike in Budge Budge Jute Mill which took place in 1895 was of a serious and extensive magnitude. While on strike, the workers were fired upon. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* published the following news about the strike.³¹

On Tuesday last at about 8 p.m. a serious riot took place at Budge Budge. Nearly seven thousand labourers of the Budge Budge Jute Mills mustered in the vicinity of the bungalow, where European employees of the mill reside. It appears that the labourers fell out with their Sirdar and proposed to strike if his services were not dispensed with. The mill authorities declining to accede to the prayer, the labourers in a body assembled and broke down the panels of the bungalow by pelting stones and brickbats. The Europeans fired on the mob. Two of the rioters were seriously wounded and admitted to the Alipore Hospital along with two police constables and a darwan of the mills who had been assaulted by the mob. The District Superintendent of Police was telegraphed too but before his arrival on the spot with an armed force the mob had dispersed. Several arrests have been made.

This report explains how the workers in their very infancy when the trade unions were yet to develop, fought with tremendous courage and militancy against the exploitation of the European capitalists and their attempt at bloody suppression of the struggle. The strike of the Budge Budge Jute Mill workers will undoubtedly be marked as a very significant event in the working-class movement of that period.

Some facts about the workers' struggles in various jute mills of Bengal and the militancy displayed by them have been recorded in *Bengal Administrative Report*, 1895-96. The report is important in as much as it is also a revelation of the attitude and behaviour shown by the European owners towards the workers of the mills. The following excerpt of the report is quite relevant in this respect.³²

There were some disturbances in connection with the wages of the operatives in the district of the 24-Parganas. The first Jute Mills, where trouble arose in consequence of the stoppage of pay of some Mohammedans who absented themselves from work on the Bakri Id festival. The operatives made a threatening demonstration against the Manager, and when the police came to arrest the ring-leaders, there was a riot, and the police were roughly handled.

Three men were arrested and punished. A similar difficulty arose in the case of Kamarhati Mills at the Muharram time, but was met by the concession of holidays. The unfavourable feature of these disturbances is that the European employees were led to use firearms to defend themselves. Shots were fired in the Titaghar case, but fortunately with no serious results, and, in the Kamarhati Mills, the employees (European—author) armed themselves with their volunteer equipment to resist a possible outbreak. Another case arose in the Kankinara Mills, where the Manager had reduced pay of the spinners from Rs. 3-8-0 to Rs. 3-4-0. The establishment of new mills across the river and at Shamnagar led the spinners to demand increased wages. The Manager tried to lock-out the ring-leaders, but this caused some excitement; however, no violence was committed, and the police arrested the rang-leaders who were bound down to keep the peace. It appears that the custom of keeping a week's pay always in hand was one cause of the disturbance. There is no doubt that this is felt as a grievance by the employees, as it prevents their leaving a mill to better themselves except at the sacrifice of a week's wages. This has been pointed out by the Commissioners to the Managers concerned. But the grievance has not been removed. During July there was a demand for higher wages among the spinners of a Jute factory in Garden Reach, but a strike was prevented by concessions. In August there was a serious disturbance at the Budge Budge Mills. It appeared that the Manager had reinstated an unpopular overseer, and this led the spinners to strike. The whole work of this mill was stopped and the Manager ordered lock-out of all the operatives, keeping at the same time the usual week's pay in hand. This led to a demonstration by a large number of men against the European quarters in the factory, but fortunately the police appeared in time to prevent the violence. Eleven men were arrested and convicted. In this case the European employees had recourse to firearms, but with no serious results.

The Managing Agents were on enquiry blamed for locking out their employees without paying them in full and also for the omission to keep a manager on the premises, the factory being managed by telephone from Calcutta. The Lieutenant-Governor strongly deprecates the practice of employing firearms to put down demonstrations on the part of the employees of the mills. He believes that the occasions on which, recourse, to such weapons is really necessary are of the rarest possible occurrence, and that there are few crowds of native workmen who would not yield to firm and reasonably conciliatory action on the part of the European Managers and assistants.'

This report though prepared by the colonial government and bound by its own class outlook cannot altogether hide the actual situation. That the industrial centres of contemporary

Bengal at least her jute industry were fermenting with sporadic labour unrest—sometimes assuming militant form, was an undeniable fact.

In 1897 widespread labour unrest prevailed in Bombay. In the late nineties a disastrous outbreak of Bubonic plague in Bombay, Kanpur and other centres took a heavy toll of life. Many labourers abandoned work and fled to the countryside, causing a serious scarcity of labour in Bombay and other industrial centres for many years. 'In Bombay, about 1898, the rivalry of hands was such that labourers were actually auctioned off on the street corners.'³³ This raised the bargaining capacity of the workers and numerous incidents of labour unrest occurred in different mills, sometimes forcing the management to raise wages.

The mill-owners introduced, during this time, daily wage system to replace monthly wages. Subsequently, the epidemic having subsided when the workers returned to the industrial centres, the owners reverted to the old system of monthly wages. This aggrieved the workers and they struck work demanding continuation of daily wage system. The strike was not, however, successful, rather the workers had to face counter-offensive from the owners. The mill-owners, it is reported, decided to employ labour and pay wages through contractors. They further decided to maintain an alternative list of labourers and put them to job in the event of any strike by the existing workers.

Many other minor strikes and labour disputes have also taken place in various industrial centres of the country but any factual statement of those struggles appears difficult for scarcity of materials. But even from these insufficient materials, a few more sprinkling facts of strikes may be gleaned out.

Messrs. Binny & Co. of Madras reported,³⁴ 'Strike, we have experienced many. Strikes occur at intervals, costing us from 300 to 3,000 rupees, according to the size and description of factory.' Another industrial concern of Madras, Messrs, Harvey & Co. said,³⁵ 'There is occasional friction but nothing that might be dignified by the name of a strike.' The Managing Director of Nagpur Empress Mills stated,³⁶ 'In the northern division work has occasionally been stopped for a day or two owing to infliction of fines or to the lowering of wages.'

Early Organizational Efforts :

Before 1895, Indian labour developed little class consciousness and hardly did anything to organize themselves. But the small strikes which had occurred nevertheless taught workers the power of united action even though they had no unions.

The associations that did appear during this period hardly resembled those of the West. The character of Mr. Lokhunday's Bombay Mills-hands' Association has already been discussed. In 1897, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of India and Burma was organized and it got registered under Indian Companies Act, 1882.³⁷ Actually the European and Aglo-Indian employees of the railways belonged to this association and in real sense it did not represent Indian labour. Further, its character fundamentally being of a mutual aid society, it did not conduct any trade union activity although this association continued to exist even in the second decade of twentieth century. This association did not therefore fall in the category of trade unions.

In 1908 when the Factory Labour Commission (Morison Commission) was appointed and started its enquiries, the Bombay Mill-hands Association had apparently ceased to exist. In Calcutta, two different unions are mentioned of which one, sometimes called the Muhammadan Association, was composed solely of mill operatives and had come into being in 1895. One of its spokesmen reported,³⁸ '[It is] doing its utmost to popularize mill work amongst masses of population in general and Musalmans in particular . . . They did not keep a list of members, but their membership numbered some thousands. Neither had they a fixed place of assembly. One Sunday in December about one thousand operatives assembled to discuss questions in connection with the present inquiry . . . They had a president, vice-president, treasurer and honorary secretary of the association. The cash balance at present would be under Rs. 100. Their last expenditure was incurred on the improvement of a mosque, and before that they disbursed alms on the occasion of the coronation. The association raised subscription for the purpose of charity, and assisted in cases of sickness, or if an operative had to be sent home.'

There is therefore no difficulty to understand the nature of this association. The other labour organization, in spite of

a very ambitious name, the Indian Labour Union, did not either appear to be a trade union in real sense. 'Its "president" was a "local barrister" probably more or less self-appointed to give play to his forensic abilities rather than for his knowledge of the labour situation. His contribution to the work of the Commission was to produce five weavers and ten spinners from the Budge Budge Jute mill and let them speak for themselves. The record as to even this modest performance is peculiar in that their statements "were recorded by the president". One suspects that this group of workers never "came before the Commission" but the president rounded them up and interviewed them in the neighbourhood of their shacks as he had done in other centres.'³⁹

These instances are sufficient to show the nature of the 'labour organizations' during the closing years of the nineteenth century. It may be said, the Indian labour was in search for trade unions which were yet to develop in real sense of the term.

Distinctive Traits of Colonial Exploitation :

Class-consciousness of the proletariat, as a general rule, rises in proportion to the advance of economic struggles against capitalist exploitation. But in a colony, some specific features of exploitation as distinct from that in a metropolitan country, impede the development of economic struggles of the workers and in consequence retard the growth of their class political consciousness.

The general nature of capitalist exploitation in colonial India was thus rendered further oppressive by these specific features. A colonial regime means the open dictatorship of imperialism in its crudest forms, implying thereby that in a colony the oppression of the working class grows immeasurably, assuming the most ugly and monstrous character. In the context of colonial India it is not only national oppression to which, in addition to social oppression, the working class was subjected as a section of the entire Indian people, the capitalist exploitation in itself was so altered that its burden on the working class increased tremendously.

Successful economic struggle is admittedly one of the main factors determining the conditions for the sale of labour-power

and the degree of capitalist exploitation. Further, this struggle puts a limit on the otherwise boundless quest for profit to which capital is impelled by competition. In independent countries the industrial worker sold his labour-power at the price which gravitated more or less towards its value or at least towards the cost of means of subsistence physically needed by the worker. But in colonial India, while on the one hand low cultural standard, lack of elementary education, heterogeneity in its composition and delay in getting organized greatly hampered the successful economic struggle of the working class, intensification of exploitation on the other rose up to such an extent that sale of labour-power by the workers at a fraction of its real value became the general rule.

The entire structure of the colonial economy was thus responsible for worsening the condition of the working class. The domination of British imperialism placed Indian capital in such a position where it had to preserve the most barbarous forms of exploitation. At a given stage of capitalist development when acquisition of relative surplus-value becomes the objective, semi-medieval forms of oppression of the working class appear unprofitable for the bourgeoisie itself. In the colonies, however, the foreign monopolies enjoying the support of the entire state machinery, the local capitalists get into an extremely difficult condition to compete with. To compensate the imbalance, the local bourgeoisie subject the working class to unscrupulous and reckless forms of exploitation.

This very process worked in India also confronting the working class with the threat of direct physical extinction. The struggle against imperialism thus objectively became the primary task of Indian proletariat although this realization did not come to them instantaneously. They had to traverse a comparatively long path through numerous economic struggles before they got imbued with this political consciousness and Indian National Congress with its narrow social base and restricted outlook during its early years had hardly any realization of this newly-begun historical process.

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PREPARATORY PHASE FOR ORGANIZED TRADE UNION MOVEMENT 1900-14

Turn of the Century—Basic Trends :

NECESSARY ingredients for national liberation movement of India started developing already in the last quarter of nineteenth century. Underlying this process was the formation of new all-India social and economic bonds and the evolution of various Indian peoples into distinct entities. Colonial subjugation was largely responsible for an uneven development of the vast Indian sub-continent, in consequence of which, this process of evolution of the Indian peoples did not start simultaneously. As a corollary, national liberation movement too developed differently in India.

This condition of uneven development prevailing, Bengal, Mararashtra and some regions of the Madras Presidency socially and economically went far ahead of the other regions of India. Calcutta in Bengal, Bombay in Maharashtra and the city of Madras became the principal centres of economic and political activities of the country and functioned as the colonial India's main outlets to the outside world, to the world capitalist market.

At the turn of the century, the national movement in these regions, especially in Bengal and Maharastra, had already assumed a developed form which exerted a great impact on the later national awakening of the entire country. Partition of Bengal in the year 1905 aroused bitter public indignation and gave rise to a mass national upsurge. The leadership of National Congress too passed from the hands of liberals like Dadabhai Naorojee and Surendra Nath Banerjee to those of the so-called extremists—Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai.

This political development worked as a favourable condition for the Indian working class too for moving ahead with its

economic struggles and raising them to a higher pitch. The period from the beginning of the century till the outbreak of the first World War is thus marked with widespread and dogged struggles of the workers. And not only economic struggles, the Indian working class performed the splendid feat of its first revolutionary political struggle in the very first decade of this century. These developed struggles ultimately laid the foundation of the first trade unions of the country—the class organizations of the Indian proletariat, although in a not yet perfect form.

The beginning of the century is also featured with the advance of industrialization with concomitant swelling of the working class in numerical strength. By the end of 1914, the strength of industrial workers in India rose to 950,973.¹

Labour during Swadeshi Movement :

The Swadeshi movement born out of the partition of Bengal in 1905 was neither confined in Bengal territorially, nor in respect of class its impact was felt only by the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. The working class of Bengal also to a great extent came within the orbit of this movement and a number of working-class actions fulminated under its impact. The movement, in fact, far transcended the bounds of the partition issue and marked an awakening of the masses to conscious struggle against colonial subjugation. It transformed itself into the first organized and conscious mass action under national-bourgeois slogans in the political history of India.

The nationalists of Bengal desirous of inducting the working class into the vortex of this mass upsurge extended their support to the immediate economic and social demands of the industrial workers whose participation in the movement reciprocally lent it a militant character.

Among a number of strikes that occurred during the period under review, the strike in the Government of India Press in Calcutta deserves special attention. Some two thousand workers of this establishment went on strike on 27 September 1905 which continued for a month. The main grievances of the workers included non-payment of Sunday and gazetted holidays, imposition of irregular fines, low rate of overtime pay and refusal of the authorities to grant leave on medical certificate.²

Amrita Bazar Patrika reported that before commencement of the strike, the workers' representatives met Mr. A. C. Banerjee, a Calcutta barrister and organizer of labour for advice on the matter who after hearing the workers' case 'urged upon them the absolute necessity of concerted action, and of having a Defence Fund of their own under the control of a Committee so that in case of a strike they might fall back upon it and carry the strike to a successful issue' and 'the advice was accepted as sound'.³

When the strike in the Government of India Press started, it was also joined by the workers of Bengal Secretariat Press. The government appointed Mr. G. Rainy, Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Department, to conduct an enquiry into the grievances of the striking Press workers. But as *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported, the method of enquiry was not fair which caused a 'good deal of disappointment amongst the men'. The enquiry at the Bengal Secretariat Press started on October 2, 1905 and the *Patrika* reported the following:⁴

Mr. G. Rainy commenced his enquiries on Monday from 10.30 a.m. Before his arrival a notice was pasted on the Press gateway informing the strikers that their request to represent their grievances by a legal adviser cannot be accepted. This notice should have been pasted at least a couple of days before for the information of the men. Its appearance at the last moment caused a good deal of disappointment amongst the men. Then again Mr. Chalmer, it is said, did not give any opportunity to the men to read it. He is reported to have stationed Darwan to watch the party who comes to the spot. . .

About 12 men consisting of compositers, distributors and pressmen were examined on Monday. Mr. Rainy did not visit the Press but sent for the men in his chamber. The interpreter was chosen by himself. The men were desirous of that somebody not connected with the Financial Department should be selected, as such as the Press Superintendent is said to be thick and thin with the present Financial Registrar. About half the men examined on Monday were selected at random and thus those who were most anxious to lay their grievances were not given any facility to appear. . . .

This farcical inquiry was indicative of the attitude of the government towards the grievances of the strikers.

But anyway, at the initial period, a settlement was reached on these issues. But just after the settlement, seven leaders of the workers were dismissed from service and arrested by the

police. The strike recommenced immediately. The leaders of the Swadeshi movement also addressed the rallies convened in support of the strike, which was seized upon as a plea by the government to dub the strike as politically motivated and unleash repression against it. On October 27, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* editorially urged intervention of the Lieutenant Governor and expressed the confidence 'that in the matter of the Government Press dispute a satisfactory and permanent settlement will be arrived at . . .' and 'the most considerate treatment possible under the circumstances for the poor, ill-paid workmen' would be meted out by the Lieutenant-Governor Sir Andrew Fraser.

On October 27, 'the compositors and pressmen of both the Government of India and the Bengal Secretariat Press met at 10. Sibnarain Das Lane, Bahir Simla to consider their grievances, Babu Charu Chandra Mitter was voted to the Chair . . .' While addressing the gathering Mr. A. K. Ghosh, a leader of the strikers and an early Bengal trade unionist referred to a meeting of the workers held on October 21, wherein 'the employees, however, decided to form a Union and elected a committee and two Honorary Secretaries, Mr. A. K. Ghosh, Bar-at-Law and Pundit B. Upadhyaya. The object of the Union and of the committee was to watch over, protect and promote the interests of the men and they were authorized to present petitions and carry on correspondence generally with the Government. . . .'⁵

Thus Bengal Press Workers' Union, one of the earliest trade unions of the country came into being on 21 October 1905.

The workers returned to work, after this meeting, on fulfilment of certain conditions which were, incorporation of the list of Bengal holidays in the Press rules, reduction in the rate of deduction for type sorting, provision for more coolies for compositors' cases, payment to salaried men for working overtime and regular maintenance of fine registers.⁶ The dismissed men were not, however, taken back.

The wave of strike-action which arose in 1905 rocked a number of industrial units. In September of that year the workers of Burn & Co. at Howrah and Calcutta Tramways Co. struck work. The coolies and scavengers of Calcutta Corporation numbering some 2,000 too organized strike during the same period demanding wage-increase which was partially met. In

October 1905, the Guards of East India Railways struck work. About 950 Guards joined this strike which was directed against the existing pay-pattern. A big strike occurred in Clive Jute Mill of Budge Budge, a few miles away from Calcutta in August 1906 where a thousand workers downed tools for better working conditions and against humiliating treatment by the British management. During this strike, a jute workers' union was formed. An official of this union Mr. A. C. Banerjee, while addressing a large gathering of the workers mentioned 'the spirit of aggression and insolence which vitiates the present-day European capitalism in this land' and urged for creating conditions for uplifting 'material position of the millhands and for their spiritual and physical development.'⁷ Writing on this strike Mr. Bipin Chandra Pal, an eminent radical nationalist leader of that time, pointed out that the Indians were now changing 'from unthinking brute instruments of European exploitation into men who know that they have a self-respect which they must not forfeit and rights which by combination they can defend.'⁸

Besides the strike in Government of India Press in Calcutta, a strike occurred in the printing press of Messrs. Thacker Spink and Co. in Calcutta in June 1906. This strike was organized by the Printers' Union which came into existence in Calcutta in 1905. The remarkable aspect of this strike was that it drew active support of the workers of other printing presses of Calcutta who during the continuation of the strike held solidarity rallies and processions. Further this strike-action was deeply tinged with nationalist ferment and the slogan *Bande Mataram*, which inspired the entire national movement of the country, was a stimulating slogan for the strikers also as it was in the case of the Government Press workers' strike of the previous year. The significance of the strike from a national point of view may be further understood from the fact that eminent national leaders of the stature of Mr. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mr. Khaparde and Dr. Munji were invited to address a big meeting of the workers organized by the Printers Union at Calcutta in support of the strike on 6 June 1906. According to the report published in *The Bengalee*, Mr. Tilak, while addressing the meeting said⁹ 'that he himself was a printer, and as such one of the members of the class to which his audience belonged.

Then Mr. Tilak dilated upon the theme as to how the old caste system, based on religion and dogmas, could profitably be altered to suit the present day needs of Trade Guilds and Unions. Tilak pointed out the great future of the Unions. He said that there was a similar union now being formed in Bombay and in a very short time would be an accomplished fact. . . ' The strikers returned to work on 13 June 1906 after a settlement was reached between the Union and Messrs. Thacker Spink and Co.¹⁰

One of the major working-class actions taking place under the impact of the anti-imperialist political awakening of this period, was a big strike which broke out on the Bengal section of the East Indian Railway in July-September 1906. *The Times*, London, lamentingly reviewed¹¹ that the strike 'was directly and avowedly due to political agitation.' The entire working force of Indian origin joined the strike which lasted for quite a few days. *Times of India* reported,¹² 'Almost all natives have left the work. Numerous small stations from Howrah to Asansol and Burdwan inclusive are closed. Goods traffic is practically at a standstill.'

The demands of the strike included higher pay and better working conditions and abolition of racial discrimination. The railwaymen also wanted substitution of the word 'Indian' for 'native' as the latter had acquired a derogatory sense.

The strike was so organized that despite occupation of the stations by the police, the men remain undaunted, and the leaders visited various stations, addressing meetings. But the colonial rulers ultimately succeeded in crushing the strike. And in a vendetta against the striking railwaymen, the most active participants, even those serving for as long as 20 to 25 years were dismissed from service.¹³

Nevertheless, this struggle which was in all probability, the first workers' strike directly connected with the national movement did not end in vain, rather it fructified in ushering in one of the first Indian trade unions—The East Indian Railway Employees' Union. The strike deeply impressed the leaders of the Swadeshi movement who actively endeavoured to spread the strike to newer centres and lent it support by organizing public meetings. Mr. C. R. Das, one of the most eminent national leaders of that time presided over a meeting of the

striking railwaymen held in Calcutta on July 29. Another national luminary of the time, Mr. Bipin Chandra Pal moved a resolution in the said meeting extending support to the strike and urging the workers to continue the fight till the demands were met.¹⁴

Even after the strike was crushed, the imperialist government was visibly alarmed at the untiring efforts of the trade union leaders in organizing the railwaymen and particularly at the national sentiment that was fast percolating into them. As an evidence of panick that gripped the administration, the special branch of police reported.¹⁵

‘ . . . the Calcutta agitators, chiefly Premtosh Bose, A. K. Ghosh and Liakat Hussain, have since August transferred the scene of their machinations to the railway centres of Asansol, Raniganj, Jamalpur and Sahibgunj, insisting the workmen there to join the Railway Union which they have started and which is to support all railway workers who go on strike. Week after week meetings have been held first at one centre, then at another, at which the railway employees have been besought in language both seductive and seditious to gain their brethren of the Howrah District and thus force the Company into acceding to their demands. The opportunity has not been missed at these meetings to advance the Swadeshi cause and excite the men to boycott English goods. Secret meetings have been held in Asansol and Calcutta and insidious attempts made to get even the coolies to join the strikers. Travelling employees of railway have used their opportunities to spread disaffection up and down the line, and suggestion was even thrown out that a social boycott should be employed to force the men to go on strike’. This explains how the trade union activities of the railwaymen linked with the surging national movement got on the nerves of the colonial government.

In August of the same year the Union conducted another strike at Jamalpur Railway Workshop and this time the striking workers succeeded in resisting police attacks. This remarkable strike of the railwaymen in 1906 enlivened the workers in other railways which resulted in the greatest ever since countrywide strike of the railwaymen in 1907.

In the second week of December 1906 a strike occurred in the Britished-owned Hooghly Jute Mill. The strike was

directed against introduction of night-shift and wage-reduction. Workers of a cotton mill also went on strike at the same time. Here also, according to the *Times of India* the 'agitators' of national movement visited the jute mill areas and attempted to form combination amongst the mill-hands.¹⁶

These industrial actions apart, this time the labourers employed in coal industry of Bengal also, who were far more backward even in simple trade union consciousness, exhibited a tendency to strike work against exploitation. Mr. B. Foley, a member of the Indian Civil Service who was appointed by the government to report on Labour in Bengal in 1906 noted,¹⁷ 'I can confirm the statement that labour is yearly becoming more and more difficult to procure, is insisting upon higher wages, and is evincing greater willingness to strike upon the slightest pretext.'

Among the topmost leaders of the national movement of Bengal, Mr. Bipin Chandra Pal lent his support to the demand of the workers. Mr. C. R. Das also came forward. Some more national leaders, lawyers and other intellectuals *viz.* Messrs. Shyamsundar Chakraborty, Apurba Kumar Ghosh, S. Halder, Aswini Coomar Banerjee, Premtosh Bose also actively stood by the workers. They were actually the organizers of early trade union movement of Bengal. But they encouraged labour movement mainly in the British-owned industries, while in regard to the Indian-owned industries they mostly kept silent. This attitude on their part emanated from the basic principles of Swadeshi movement and the nationalist feeling of that period which was a blend of hostility towards the actions affecting the interests of the nascent Indian bourgeoisie with sympathy for the workers' struggles in British-owned industrial establishments.

The working class of Bengal undeniably played a significant role in the anti-imperialist political upsurge of 1905. Despite this glory, the insufficient development of their class-consciousness kept them bound under national-bourgeois leadership.

Struggles in Other Provinces :

In 1903, there was a strike of the workmen in the Press and Machine section of the Madras Government Press against overtime work without payment. It lasted for about six months

during which convicts from the Penitentiary were brought and put on work. After much suffering the strikers returned to work.¹⁸

Introduction of electric light about 1905 prompted the mill-owners to further lengthening of working hours in many mills. This was resented by the workers and a number of sporadic strikes took place. In the textile industry of Bombay when the owners imposed excessive hours of work taking advantage of electric light, a number of strikes occurred in several mills in 1905. Some of these strikes were accompanied with militant demonstrations. In October of that year the strikes became widespread affecting Tricumdas Mill, Phoenix Mill and several other mills.¹⁹ About the serious nature of the strikes *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported, "The recent mill labour agitation in Bombay culminated in a serious disturbance last evening (8th October) when a large mob of mill-hands, numbering, it is estimated roughly, something between three and four thousand made a violent demonstration in front of several mills on the De Lisle Road at Parel. The crowd of the operatives responsible for the disturbance not only refused to work after sun-set with electric light, but succeeded in preventing other mill-hands, who were inclined to continue working after twilight, after assembling in a body outside the Mills and creating what at one time threatened to assume a very serious riot. . . ."²⁰

Patrika later reported prosecution of several demonstrators.

In 1907 also there were strikes in Bombay for wage-increase, some of which lasted for over a week.

Five hundred postmen of Bombay went on strike on 17 August 1906 demanding increase of wages. The strike lasting for over a week brought postal service to a standstill. The government issued warrants of arrest against six leaders of the striking employees.²¹

At Ahmedabad, the number of factories marked an increase during this period but the supply of labour fell short of the demand. The workers therefore found convenient ground for demanding wage-increase and a number of partial strikes took place.²²

Truly, during this period strike-actions of the workers increased both in number and in intensity. Various statements of the employers and government spokesmen bear testimony to

it. One of the mill-owners of Bombay told the Factory Labour Commission, 1908 that more systematic and successful strikes had lately been taking place.²³ According to the District Magistrate of Ahmedabad, 'Strikes very often occur to obtain higher wages and the owners had to give in, otherwise other mills would snap the men up.'²⁴ Mr. Barucha, Director of Industries, Bombay Presidency observed that 'the hands were all-powerful against the owners, and could combine, though they had not got a trade union.'²⁵ The Deputy Commissioner of Wardha, a British Civilian, seemed a bit panicky over the still embryonic class-consciousness of the Indian labour when he stated,²⁶ 'The workers were masters of the situation, and the mill-owners were really more in need of protection than the workers.'

When the capitalists were confronted with growing resistance from the workers, a tendency on the part of the employers and the government officials towards presenting a little exaggerated view of the situation cannot, however, be ruled out. In this respect, the study made by the Factory Labour Commission of the existing labour condition seems to be more balanced. According to the Commission, 'The history of movement in Bombay, and of similar movements in other industrial centres, shows clearly that while the operatives fully understand the machinery of local strikes, and have repeatedly forced employers to comply with their demands in isolated cases, they are as yet unable to combine over any large area with the object of securing a common end by concerted action.'²⁷

The expanding struggle of the workers caused deep anxiety in the minds of the colonial authorities which compelled them to pay some attention to the Indian labour problem. Goaded by their own commercial interests, the British capitalists of Lanchashire also, were simultaneously pressurizing the government to look into the complaints of cheap labour, unduly long working hours and other excesses in Indian industries. This led the government to appoint the Textile Factory Labour Committee or the Freer-Smith Committee on 17 December 1906 to investigate the conditions of labour in textile factories. The report of the Committee which was presented on 1 June 1907 confirmed the harsh exploitation of the Indian workers, made a special reference to their appalling housing conditions and

proposed limitation of working period to 12 hours a day, 72 a week.²⁸

But the British employers in Bombay and Kanpur opposed this recommendation to limit working day to 12 hours. The Indian mill-owners also ignored the decision twice taken by the Bombay Mill-Owners' Association on a 12-hour day. Here again the selfish class interests of the British and Indian capitalists coincided and led them to jointly oppose any limitation of working hours.

The high magnitude of labour movement during 1906-7 compelled the government to look into the conditions of labour in other industries also besides cotton-textile and at the end of 1907 the Factory Labour Commission was set up under the chairmanship of Mr. Morrison.

But overwhelming majority of the Indian manufacturers were against any interference of the authorities and any limitation of working hours. Rather, they insisted that the workers should work from sunrise to sunset.²⁹ A prominent Indian businessman of that period, Mr. Vithaldas Damodher Thackersey, who was a member of the Commission expressed this view of the Indian bourgeoisie in his note of dissent. Therein he asserted that he was 'strongly of the view that it is extremely impolite and unjust, especially after the assurances of the Government of India in 1891, to interfere with a system so agreeable to manufacturers and operatives, and suitable to the condition of India'.³⁰ In support of his opinion, he referred to the recommendations of Factory Labour Commission, 1890, which opposed legislative restriction of working hours of male adults.

Dr. T. M. Nair's note of dissent to the Commission's Report more nakedly exposed the attitude of the Indian manufacturers towards the labourers. Dr. Nair found 'that my countrymen as a class were more unsympathetic and hard employers of labour than the European manufacturers . . . Even some of the most enlightened and educated Indian gentlemen, with whom I discussed industrial questions, had not a single word of sympathy with the labourers to express. They were all anxious to make up for lost time and to push on their industrial ventures and to accumulate wealth. But as for the workers, they were part of the machinery of production and nothing more. To me

this discovery came as an unpleasant and disheartening surprise. . . .³¹

This was once again a vindication of the depth of class unity of the Indian capitalists against the proletariat.

It requires hardly to mention that the British capitalists too strongly opposed limitation of working hours. The Chairman of the Indian Jute Mills Association voiced this opposition on their behalf.³² A British factory-owner from Agra went so far as to haughtily declare that in Britain the trade unions might have a say in the matter of fixing working hours, but he did not wish to see such organizations in India.³³ So, it was a combined opposition from both the Indian and British owners.

Widespread Strikes of Railwaymen in 1907 :

Steady deterioration in the economic conditions and intensification of exploitation by way of increased work-load impelled the railwaymen of different railways in the country to widespread action in the year 1907.

Workers in the big railway workshops put up stiff resistance against the repressive policies of the management. 3,000 workers of the railway workshops at Bombay struck work on 1 May 1907. The strike continued for over a week and the men returned to work after winning some concessions.³⁴

The men on the railways in East India organized the biggest strikes of the year 1907. The railway guards and engine drivers began an indefinite strike on November 18. Most of the strikers were, however, of European origin and Anglo-Indians. Indian employees constituted only a minor section. The demands of the striking employees were also purely economic. Yet, this strike greatly stirred the country and aptly demonstrated the strength of organized action by the working masses.

Originating at Asansol Railway station the strike soon spread from Allahabad to Tundula in the north. The action started on a 43-point charter of demands which included—revision of the fines and penalty system that in fact reduced the pay-packets, improved working conditions, substituting the prevailing time system of payment by a mile system.

The strike was so successful that practically none of the trains could reach Calcutta. The management made an attempt

to bring Mr. Bepin Chandra Pal and some other prisoners from Asansol to Calcutta by a train of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway, but 200 strikers stood on the track and foiled the attempt. The railwaymen of Howrah station were so determined to continue the strike and not to allow any train to leave the station that hundreds of passengers got stranded and 300 wagons of goods trains stood completely idle. Allahabad and Kanpur fell totally paralyzed by November 20, and all trains stopped running on the Howrah-Kalka line. This deadlock resulted in a serious coal shortage in the Calcutta mills and in holding up of the outgoing ships in the Calcutta port. By November 24, about 1,000 empty wagons and 400 loaded wagons got stuck up in the Calcutta port area. Burdwan, Asansol, Moghalsarai, Allahabad, Tundula, Kanpur, Ambala and various other stations having been hit by the surging strike-wave, train communication on these lines completely broke down.³⁵

The railway authorities and the government then took recourse to repressive actions. Troops and armed police were posted at the railway stations. Howrah Station was put under army control and a large contingent of armed forces was dispatched to Asansol.

But this attempt of the authorities to terrorize the workers by a show of force produced an opposite result. The strike spread out even to the Bengal-Nagpur Railway. The attempt of the authorities to use the engine-drivers of this railway on other lines deeply aggrieved them. The guards too joined the strike. But this strike did not, however, last for more than 24 hours. A peace committee consisting of the representatives of the railway authorities and the employees was formed which assured settlement of the strikers' demands.³⁶

The striking railwaymen on the East India Railway too agreed to present their demands to a Conciliation Board proposed by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and accepted by the railway authorities and the strike was called off on November 28, 1907.³⁷

This ten-day long strike on the East India Railway from November 18 to November 28, 1907 completely cut off the city of Calcutta, the headquarters of the Viceroy from the rest of India. Writing on this strike A. I. Levkovsky, an eminent Soviet Indologist observed,³⁸ 'It was a serious blow to the pres-

tige of British rule—a blow which undermined the belief in its might.’

Truly, this strike though predominantly involved the European and Anglo-Indian employees and caused some mixed reactions in nationalist circle, received on the whole, support and sympathy from the Indian workers. Some nationalist leaders also addressed rallies at Asansol and even distributed leaflets in its support. These leaflets carried the slogan *Bande Mataram*.

The strike on the East India Railway actually symbolized the general dissatisfaction among the railway workers throughout the country. On December 21, 1907 a strike again commenced on the East Bengal Railway. This time the Engine drivers, firemen and the brakemen struck work demanding higher wages. Troops were called out and the British soldiers were engaged to run the trains. Heavy repression was simultaneously brought down upon the striking railwaymen. 600 of them were dismissed from service and many others were indiscriminately punished in different methods. By the first week of January, 1908, the strike came to an end.³⁹

In January 1908, 8,000 workers of the railway workshops at Bombay again struck work demanding compensation for the rising cost of living. The men resumed duties after partial settlement of the grievances.

It is no stress of imagination to consider this extensive strike action of the railwaymen on different railways as a link in the chain of countrywide anti-imperialist awakening of 1905-08.

FIRST POLITICAL STRIKE OF INDIAN WORKERS AT BOMBAY

Political and Social Background :

Indian working class launched its first and direct political action in July 1908 in the city of Bombay. This first political action of the Indian labour was a great historical event signifying the tremendous revolutionary potential of this new social force. For a fuller appraisal of the significance of this political strike, a correct understanding of the condition of the

Bombay workers of contemporary period—its size, consciousness and level of its development and also the stage and character of the prevailing political movement of the city becomes necessary.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Bombay already developed as the second biggest city and one of the two largest industrial centres of India. According to Census of India, 1911 the population of the city stood at 979,000.⁴⁰ The number of factories registered under Factory Act, 1908 was 168. In 1906, 34 per cent of the population was engaged in industry, construction, transport services and auxiliary jobs.⁴¹

But the development of industry in this city exhibited a typical colonial pattern. It followed no balanced growth of different branches of industry. Textile manufacture became the main branch of industrial activity of the city employing about 100,000 workers out of a total industrial labour force of the city numbering between 180,000 and 200,000. Of course, there were 100,000 unskilled labourers more in the city who worked as coolies or were engaged in similar other jobs.

Population of Bombay was composed of different Indian nationalities. The Marathis were, however, predominant showing 51 per cent of the total, the Gujaratis coming next constituting 26 per cent and the rest belonging to other nationalities and language groups.

The national composition of the city, however, did not correspond exactly to that of the proletariat. Census of India, 1911 shows that among the textile workers of Bombay, 90 per cent were Marathas while in other branches of industry too the proportion of the Marathas were not less than 80 per cent.⁴²

Despite this preponderance of the Marathas, a considerable number of Hindi-speaking, Gujarati, Telegu and other workers formed part of the Bombay proletariat, which thus essentially possessed a multinational character. The multinational composition of the Bombay proletariat was conducive to the growth of struggle for the country as a whole, but at the same time the overwhelming majority of the Marathas facilitated the establishment of contact by the national democratic forces of Maharashtra with the workers of Bombay. Religion, language and nationality played a not insignificant role in the early development of the Indian working class. The national move-

ment that started developing at the beginning of the twentieth century did not do so keeping aloof from religion. Political appeal had a tinge of religion also. The patriotism and political philosophy propagated by Mr. Bal Gangadhar Tilak and other nationalist leaders were practically cast in the shell of Hindu religion. Moreover, in the particular case of Maharashtra symbolizing Shivaji as the national hero of Maharashtra, idealization of his heroic fight for freedom against the Moghul Emperor for rousing the masses against the British imperialists appealed more to the Hindus than to the Muhammadans. And in Bombay, three-fourths of the workers were Hindus, and the rest Muhammadans. In essence, the close contiguity of three lakh workers of Bombay and the proportion of mingling of these religion, language and nationality very well corresponded to the stage and character of the then national movement of Maharashtra. These distinctive features placed the Bombay proletariat in a more favourable position for participation in political struggle than their counterpart in Calcutta, the other big industrial centre of India.

In Calcutta, majority of the workers hailed from outside Bengal. The multinational and multilingual working class of Calcutta was born out of the impoverished peasants belonging to different nationalities and linguistic groups. They came mostly from the United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa and other far off regions. Cut off from their traditional abode, they were forced to work in a different and unfamiliar social environment. Language, custom, social and even food habits greatly differed. This feeling of distance and manysided unfamiliarity weakened the link between these workers and the developing national political movement of Calcutta and the whole of Bengal. The national-political awakening that swept India during 1905-08 attained comparatively higher degree in Bengal where the economic struggles of the workers too assumed nearly an all-pervasive form. Despite these apparently favourable circumstances, the working class of Bengal as a whole, due primarily to its absolutely heterogeneous composition and virtual absence of its link with the new soil, felt utter diffidence in getting mixed up with the political effervescence of the province. But the Bengali section of the working class who were rooted in the soil came definitely under the political spell and the economic

struggles they embarked upon during this period had a discernible political flavour. The strikes in the East Bengal Railway, Government of India Press, Calcutta and in some other establishments where the Bengali workers absolutely dominated in numerical strength are cases in point. But the preponderantly multinational character of the Bengal working class, in course of time, proved to be highly beneficial and at a higher phase of national liberation struggle, its integrating effect manifestly came out. The high degree of multi-national character lately acted as a favourable force in inculcating a broader political outlook and higher consciousness in the working class of Bengal.

However, the sum-total condition of the Bombay proletariat, notwithstanding its political immaturity and lack of organization favoured its becoming a decisive force in the struggle that broke out in the city. The economic and political struggles of the working class were objectively directed against the colonial rule over India. These struggles therefore received sympathy and support from those strata of Indian society whose interests had been jeopardized by colonial exploitation. Likewise, those classes and groups whose interests accorded with the interests of the colonial rulers were impelled with animosity against these struggles. The advancing movement of the working class, the first political action of the Bombay workers in particular, brought to the surface this contradiction of Indian society.

The political action of the Bombay workers in 1908, followed as it did at the crest of mass-awakening that began in 1905, was also marked by the influence of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Czarist Russia during 1905-07 and the political general strike which the Russian working class used as the main weapon in that revolution.

The sharply ebullient worker-peasant struggles of 1905-07, surging mass movement and the growing revolutionary tendency of the people sparked off a crisis among the Indian bourgeoisie which openly manifested itself during Surat Congress held in 1907. In this session, the Indian National Congress stood divided in two groups—moderates and the so-called extremists. The moderates advocated a policy of co-operation with the British Government and simultaneous abandonment of boycott movement and the path of violence. On the other side,

Mr. Tilak, the principal leader of the so-called extremists, urged for a mass movement against British rule. With his followers he approached the workers also and goaded them to join the mass-political struggle. Of course, this attempt on their part did not follow from a realization of the revolutionary potential of the working class, but it followed from a purely pragmatic viewpoint, bound by their own narrow class outlook, of drawing this vast unorganized mass to feed and strengthen the anti-imperialist struggle led and controlled by the bourgeoisie.

So, confined within the limitations of his own class outlook, Mr. Tilak could neither attach any importance to the organized revolutionary activities of the masses, nor he was capable of considering the working class as an independent political force. These deficiencies notwithstanding, Mr. Tilak's influence on the people and the working class of Maharashtra was unbounded.

Tilak was arrested at Bombay on 24 June 1908. Scared by the intensity of Swadeshi movement and boycott of foreign goods, and various local upsurges, the British Government proceeded against Tilak on the charge of sedition in a bid to halt the rising tide of revolutionary struggle. After a show of trial, Tilak was sentenced to six years' imprisonment.

The deep discontent evoked by the arrest of Tilak and his imprisonment burst forth in a countrywide mass upsurge. The masses organized strikes, *hartals* and demonstrations at various places. But the most important feature that marked this movement was the Bombay workers' political strike and *hartal* of the masses in July 1908. The bourgeois historians, because of their class limitations, could not attach any importance to this first political strike of the Indian working class. But this political strike had, in fact, an enormous significance in the course of revolutionary struggle of the Indian people. While analyzing this first political strike of the Indian proletariat, D. C. Home observed,⁴³ 'Unfortunately this event has not found its rightful place either in our written history or in popular narrations of our fight for independence. Both the imperialist falsifiers of our history and the bourgeois historians have deliberately suppressed it—and for the same reason: both were mortally afraid of the class conscious action of the working class. But the

working class has ever cherished the memory of their first great struggle and their martyrs. However, the real story has never been fully told.'

Although the imperialists and the bourgeois historians tried to suppress the importance of this event, the great import of this struggle could not escape the eyes of Lenin and in 1908 itself, pointing to this strike, he observed,⁴⁴ 'In India, too, the proletariat has already developed to conscious political mass struggle and, that being the case, the Russian-style British regime in Indian is doomed.'

The Struggle Begins :

The people of Bombay burst out in deep resentment and anger during the very trial of Tilak. The first clash occurred on June 29 between the armed police force and thousands of people waiting outside the court. The clashes intensified when the trial actually started on July 13. That day, all streets were blocked by the armed forces in order to stop the approach of the workers to the court area. The workers' mood got on the nerves of the British rulers, hence there warlike measures. Despite this, right in the morning of July 13, a large section of the workers of Greaves, Cotton & Co. mill downed tools and walked out. The armed police began dispersing the demonstrators and clashes occurred. Referring to this incident, A. I. Chicherov wrote,⁴⁵ 'It may be definitely stated that the main characteristic features of the movement in defence of Tilak emerged on the very first day of the trial. The most important feature was the strike action of the Bombay mill-hands and their active participation in mass processions. In Lenin's words; the masses began to stand up for *their* writers and political leaders. . . . Thus, the mass demonstrations of the Bombay proletariat were a good school for its own political education, and drew the city poor, and petty bourgeoisie into the political struggle.'

This demonstration of the workers was indeed joined by the masses of Bombay and the panicky British Government ordered the army to surround the mill areas in order to desist the workers from entering the heart of the city.

Same form of agitation continued on July 14, 15 and 16. But it assumed a wider form on July 17. After midday inter-

val a large number of workers of Lakshmidas, Globe, Crescent, Jamshed, Narayan, Karimbhai, Muhammadbhai, Britannia, Phoenix, Greaves, Cotton & Co. and other Bombay mills struck work and came out in procession. Workers ceased work in Indian and British-owned mills alike. A 20,000 strong procession of the workers moved round the industrial area and urged upon the workers of all factories to come out on strike. The same thing was repeated on July 18. But that day police opened fire upon the workers. On July 19, strike-wave reached a new height and 65,000 workers of about 60 factories of the industrial centres of Mahim and Parel were out on strike. On July 20, the workers were again fired upon. Now the movement did not remain confined among the industrial workers alone. They were joined by the dockers as well as other toiling men connected with small trades, shops and bazaars. July 21 saw a further extension of the strike. One thousand dock labourers also joined the strike. On July 22, 5 strikers were put on trial and convicted. This conviction was nothing but an indication of the vindictiveness of the colonial rulers towards the rising revolutionary movement. *Times of India* rightly observed that this drama of trial was arranged⁴⁶ 'to inflict exemplary punishment on the accused as it was necessary to show the other mill-hands the gravity of such offence.'

July 22 was the concluding day of Tilak's trial. Inclement weather lashed the city. But braving gusty wind and torrential rains thousands of people assembled near the High Court. Tilak was sentenced to six years' imprisonment and was whisked away from the Court. Then knowing not what to do, the angry crowd left the place in a state of utter perplexity. But the workers came out with a programme of action. In the words of D. C. Home, 'they struck work'. The following day, July 23, the first 'complete strike was observed.'⁴⁷

July 23 witnessed the beginning of the highest phase of the strike movement. The Bombay proletariat began its first political strike from that day in protest against the conviction of Tilak.

100,000 workers joined the political strike on that day and the common masses observed *hartal*. The broadest section of the city population came shoulder to shoulder with the proletariat in its political action.

From July 24 the masses started encountering the armed police and armymen and street-battles ensued. Incensed with vengeance, the British rulers swooped down upon the masses but the undaunted workers came out in resistance. The entire city of Bombay thus reverberated with pitched battles, heroically fought by thousands of workers. Thus the Indian proletariat received the first schooling in 'street-fighting' on the streets of Bombay. It was a great event ushering in a new chapter in the revolutionary struggle of the working class. Referring to this action of resistance by the workers on that day, D. C. Home wrote,⁴⁸ 'having never before experienced any organized defiance from the workers on any political issue, the authorities did not take serious notice of it. They were sure that a host of 'native' workers would scamper like flies the moment the white-skinned representatives of the law appeared on the horizon.'

So, a large armed battalion commanded by the British officers advanced and ordered the mass of workers to immediately disperse. D. C. Home again writes,⁴⁹ 'Little did the police know that they were confronted with a mass of workers who had by then matured enough to know their own strength and the dignity of their class.'

To utter astonishment of the British officers, the excited crowd completely ignored and jeered at their peremptory orders. The enraged officers then started firing upon the crowd at random. Thus furiously attacked by the police, though the crowd at first had to retreat a little, in no time they divided themselves into two and again assembled. But this time their calmness gave place to active resistance and they started counter-offensive by heavy brick-batting. With unflinching courage and heroism thus the workers of Bombay with only bricks and stones in their hands battled against the heavily armed troops. But this unequal battle could not last long. Many workers met martyr's death and many more were injured. Among the martyrs was one Ganpat Govind who till his last breath was directing the crowd to fight undauntedly.

No Indian police was deployed during the clash on that day as the British Government had information of a brewing discontent among the Indian police force against the prosecution of Tilak. This is indeed a noteworthy fact indicating a

growing anti-imperialist sentiment among all strata of Indian people including those in the punitive forces.

Further information is available pointing out a close inter-connection between the political general strike of the workers and *hartal* of the rest of the population of Bombay. One such instance was that the traders sold rice below cost to the workers. This shows the development of a bond of unity between the proletariat and the petty-bourgeois people in the course of revolutionary struggle against imperialism.

The role played by the Indian mill-owners in this movement is also to be noted. Alarmed at the course of events, the Commissioner of Police on July 24 convened a meeting of the mill-owners and asked them to oppose this movement. Responding to this bidding of the colonial rulers, the mill-owners held a meeting of their association wherein according to *Times of India* report, its president urged 'it was in the interest of industry to dissuade the men from going on a general strike'. The president further pointed out that it was the duty of the mill-owners "not to embarrass the government in any way and it was incumbent upon them to exert their influence to prevail upon the men to respect law and authority and resume work."⁵⁰ Further, when the battles continued even on July 25, the next day, i.e., on July 26 at the instance of Sir Vithaldas Damodher Thackersey, a big mill-owner and cotton merchant, the Bombay Native Piece Goods Merchants' Association resolved in a meeting that 'all members be requested to open their shops, which have been closed since Thursday (July 23rd) on account of the absence of the servants.'⁵¹

These events point out the position taken by the big national bourgeoisie in regard to this mass patriotic movement. While the small trading community remained in alliance with the fighting proletariat, the big national bourgeoisie predominantly took up a temporizing position. Moreover, frightened by the political awakening of the proletariat, a large section of them expressed willingness to help the colonial rulers and some even came out openly hand in glove with the imperialist oppressors to break the revolutionary movement. But in direct contrast to this pusillanimity of the big national bourgeoisie and surrender of a section of it, was the poverty-crushed and ignorance-steeped workers' heroic refusal to meekly bow down to slavery and

colonial oppression. As A. I. Chicherov has said,⁵² 'Particularly noteworthy was the young Bombay proletariat's staunchness in struggle, its ability to develop better and more effective tactics of waging it, many of its actions being well organized. All this testifies to the high morale of the young proletariat in its first serious battles with imperialism.'

On July 27, new forces joined the fray. The petty-bourgeoisie which had all through been siding with the proletariat, now joined the street-fighting against the armed troops. So also did the other non-industrial labourers. The poorer section of the business community also participated in the rallies and demonstrations. Printed leaflets in Gujarati bearing Tilak's portrait were distributed among the people expressing solidarity with and urging furtherance of the struggle.

The colonial subjugators could not tolerate it. At their bidding, the troops opened fire upon the demonstrators who were thousands in number. But instead of beating a retreat the crowd divided itself into a number of groups inside lanes and by-lanes and put up stiff resistance against the police and the army by showering stones and brick-bats. One Gujarati business man named Keshavlal Kanji was the main leader of that day's action. Along with others, Kanji also embraced a martyr's death being mercilessly hit by police firing.

On July 28, an entirely new section of the toiling masses entered the battle-field. They were the domestic servants. Before joining the city life to eke out a living, these poor people belonged to the peasant community of Ratnagiri. Taking up position on the terraces of different buildings and in the narrow lanes, they fought the troops by incessantly showering stones at them. That day, the workers too came out in large demonstration and encountered the armed infantry.

July 28 was the concluding day of the political general strike that began on July 23. Tilak was sentenced to six years' imprisonment, the workers and the masses kept their pledge—one day strike for every year of the sentence inflicted upon Tilak. But this heroic deed took a heavy toll of life. At least 200 people were killed, many were injured and many more taken to custody.

All sections of the toiling masses of Bombay joined these battles. The British authorities tried to propagate that the

muslim community of the city held aloof from this general strike. But available reports confirm that all shops of the city owned by the Hindus and Muslims were closed in sympathy with the strike. Twenty per cent of the workers belonged to the Muslim community and they also equally joined the strike.

Some Lessons :

This political general strike was preconditioned by the wretched economic plight of the Bombay workers. As workers of a colonial country, while struggling against the excessive exploitation of both the British and native capitalists, they were fast realizing the role of the British colonial rule as the root cause of this exploitation. This realization stimulated them to take active part in national liberation movement. The arrest and conviction of their beloved leader, Mr. Tilak unmasked the extortive and repressive character of imperialism and they instantaneously rose up in resistance.

The method applied by the Bombay workers to rise up against imperialism was the historically tested working class method of political general strike and direct confrontation with the armed forces of the oppressors. Paris Commune was established by the workers of Paris in 1871 through armed confrontation, likewise in 1905 the Russian working class forged ahead adopting the method of political general strike and armed resistance. Thus following the revolutionary tradition of the international proletariat, the workers of Bombay also resorted to the same method of political general strike and open resistance in the anti-imperialist upsurge of 1908.

Further, no political party of the working class having yet been born in India during that period, there was no political guidance of the working class from the point of their own class ideology. Despite this negative feature, the workers did not fail to choose their own revolutionary way which indeed marks the historical characteristic of this struggle of the Bombay proletariat.

The path devised by Indian National Congress was a path of diffidence and occasional compromise with imperialism. But the path shown by the working class was directly opposite to that of bourgeois-led Congress and therefore the Indian

bourgeoisie could not heartily accept this uncompromising struggle of the Bombay workers.

This struggle of the working class of Bombay, developing in spite of their political immaturity, absence of political philosophy and a party of their own, pointed out to the Indian people the correct path of anti-imperialist mass struggle, the great significance of which in the political history of India cannot in any way be missed.

Religion—A Negative Trait :

Thanks to their petty-bourgeois social base and revivalist outlook, the so-called extremist-nationalists were incapable of raising their conception of nationalism and their political activities above religion. Rather, their political philosophy was largely based upon the religious and feudal beliefs of the people. According to Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, 'the revival of Indian nationalism in 1907 was definitely reactionary' and 'it was a religious nationalism'.⁵³ The political propaganda conducted by the extremist-nationalists was devoid of any conducive role in developing the class-consciousness of the workers. In ultimate analysis it rather sought to vitiate it.

Tactics of their agitation clearly demonstrate how much the Tilakites appealed to the religious and caste susceptibilities of the workers. One of the posters pasted by them in working-class areas said that any worker going to work after mid-day interval would be regarded as the son of a sweeper or of a European. Another declared that the men who continued to work would be thought guilty of killing kine.⁵⁴

Many other varieties of superstitious appeals were used by them to get hold of the workers. Respect for the higher castes and other feudal traditions that prevailed among the workers were also made use of. Tilak and many of the Tilakites being Brahmin by caste, the lower caste workers naturally nourished a highly reverent attitude towards them. This caste-prestige was utilized by the Tilakites in organizational activities.

Likewise in Bengal, Mr. Aurobindo Ghose, Mr. Bipin Pal and other extremist-nationalists used to approach the workers and the masses with religious appeals.

Indeed, these national leaders made a reactionary combination of nationalism and Hindu conservatism and as an alter-

native to western civilization they tried to establish the superiority of ancient 'Hindu civilization' or 'Aryan civilization' in a greater sense. Tilak founded 'Cow Protection Society' and introduced 'Shivaji Festival' and 'Ganapati Festival'. And these reactionary social and religious functions were used by him as vehicles to propagate nationalism. Similarly in Bengal, nationalism was sought to be organized on the basis of religion. The Bengal nationalists and extremists popularized worship of Goddess Kali as a source of political strength. Thus their attempt was to lead the most progressive movement of India—the national movement on the basis of ancient Hindu religion and supernatural credulities. The highly vicious effect of this Hindu-casteism and religious beliefs on Indian working-class movement in its early phase stood out crudely on the occasion of the strike of the Parel Workshop workers of B. B. and C. I. Railway in May 1907, which involved as many as 3,500 men. To quote *Times of India*, among other reasons, 'The immediate cause of the strike appears to be the distributing attendance tickets to the workmen. . . They complained that owing to the new system a great rush was made by the men to get their tickets from the Board, and as men of different castes came into close contact with one another, the food which they carried with them, was polluted.' And this led the mass of workers to a big strike.⁵⁵

The vicious effect of mingling politics with religion manifested itself not only in the early phase, Hindu nationalism joined by two-nation theory and Islamism of Muslim league continued to vitiate the political movements, working-class fraternity and popular consciousness in later period also.

Some More Events :

With the cooling down of the political heat generated by the general strike of 1908, a resumption of the agitation for the improvement of the condition of the workers was observed. The Bombay Mill-hands' Association by then, had ceased to function while the Factory Labour Commission under Mr. Morrison was going ahead with its investigation. The Bombay Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha was founded in this situation, by Messrs. S. K. Bole, N. A. Talekerkar and B. R. Nare in 1910. This was a workers' welfare organization run on a

humanitarian cause on behalf of the workers. This Sabha demanded a 12-hour working day, compensation for fatal industrial accidents and facilities for education of workers' children. During the same time, another philanthropic organization—Social Service League, Bombay, came into being and started functioning among the workers.

The Factory Act of 1911 though reduced the working day, did not contain any provision to prevent wage-cut. This resulted in proportional reduction of wages in different mills simultaneous with reduction of the working day. A number of strikes occurred in the principal industrial centres of the country against this wage-cut.

It transpires from an analysis of the different aspects of the working-class struggles during the period under review that despite growing struggles and not too little achievements, Indian working-class movement had not yet reached a sufficiently organized and powerful stage. But the extension of the struggles and growth of a number of organizations, though of a primary character, might be said to have laid the foundation for building up of modern trade unions and properly organized trade union movement. Further, as the workers themselves were not sufficiently mature to guide their movement at this stage the middle-class trade union workers played a commendable role in organizing and leading the working-class struggles during this period. World War I of 1914-18 and Russian Revolution of 1917 brought about distinguishable changes in both world and national situation. This gave a new turn to the Indian working-class movement and thus began the period of more class-conscious proletarian actions and growth of trade unions in the true sense of the term.

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FIRST WORLD WAR—POLITICAL AWAKENING OF WORKING CLASS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZED TRADE UNION MOVEMENT 1914-20

Condition of Industry and Industrial Workers during First World War :

CAPITALIST development in India got accelerated and shot up to a considerably high level on the eve of First World War. The increase in the number of joint-stock companies reflects this progress. In 1900, the number of registered firms was 1,360 with a paid-up capital of Rs. 362,800,000, which in 1907, rose to 2,661 with a paid-up capital of Rs. 508,100,000. It marked a further increase at the beginning of the World War when the number of registered firms stood at 2,553 with a paid-up capital of Rs. 721,000,000.¹

There were two basic means of imperialist exploitation of the country—one directly by the colonial government and the other through the immediate operations of British private capital. The relative strength of these two basic means of colonial plunder and their forms, of course, varied and prior to World War I it was British private monopoly capital that deeply entrenched in the country and swallowed her wealth.

With the outbreak of the war, the colonial exploitation of India assumed a horribly naked form. The government widely used the country's industrial potential for the needs of the war. The military deliveries particularly enriched the British owners of the jute factories. Likewise, the cotton and woollen mills worked for the army supplying uniforms, blankets, etc. But the intensification of exploitation reflected itself in draining more raw materials from the country at rates much below the world rates and dismantling of equipments in key branches of the economy, particularly the railways, and waterways. Railway track, bridge structures, locomotives, rolling stock and Indian Post and Telegraph equipments were taken out

of India in fairly large volume for the purpose of war.

Financial robbery of the country during the war thrust a heavy burden of misery on the working people. Taxation was increased by more than 50 per cent. Direct military expenditure almost doubled the pre-war figure while the cost of civil administration greatly mounted. Paper money was forced on the people causing inflation to assume alarming proportions and speculators were given a free hand to pocket enormous profits at the expense of the Indian people. Prices sky-rocketed registering 100 per cent rise in Calcutta and similar rise in other parts of India.

Alongside this increased privation of the Indian working people, the world conflict, however, offered the Indian bourgeoisie opportunities to prosper. The crisis of Indian capitalist enterprise on the eve of the war, was an inevitable consequence of the country's socio-economic and political development. The mass national upsurge of 1905-08 had caused a certain amount of disadvantage to the British monopolies and rendered substantial support to the fairly broad development of Indian capitalist enterprise. But with the subsequent fading away of the upsurge, the British monopolies recovered and consolidated their position, while Indian capital, encountering hard competition from fortified British capital, got into increasing difficulties. Thus followed numerous crashes of weaker Indian companies.

But the outbreak of the war enabled the Indian enterprise as a whole to emerge out of this crisis. The main advantages accruing to Indian capitalist enterprise during the war were less competition from the major imperialist powers, a larger market for country-made goods inside and outside the country, war contracts, relatively cheaper raw agricultural materials, lower real wages, and higher prices of manufactured goods. Simultaneously there were certain disadvantages also that impeded the growth of Indian capital. Shrinkage of internal market due to absolute impoverishment of the working people, decline in the shipment of industrial raw materials and semi-manufactured goods from abroad, deterioration of transport facilities inside the country and some such factors contributed to this impediment.

Still, on the whole, Indian capitalism made considerable progress. Motivated by war-time expediency of drawing the

unstinted support of the Indian bourgeoisie, the British Government also took the step of appointing Indian Industrial Commission in May 1916 to examine the whole question of industrial development in India, to enquire into its possibilities—and to indicate new openings for profitable employment of Indian capital and industry. This apart, during the war the number of joint-stock companies registered in the country increased from 2,553 to 2,789 and their capital grew from Rs. 721,000,000 to Rs. 1,066,100,000.²

Between 1914 and 1918, in the cotton industry—the largest sphere of Indian capitalist enterprise, though the number of working factories declined from 271 to 262, the number of looms grew from 104,000 to 116,000 and the number of workers increased from 260,000 to 282,000.³ Output of textiles also swelled by nearly one-third between 1914-15 and 1917-18.

Working at full capacity production at the Tata Iron and Steel Co. also increased. War-time profits enabled the Tata concern to build two other hydro-power stations in 1916 and 1919 in addition to the first one commissioned in 1915. During the war three cement factories were commissioned, the State buying most of their products. Production of some chemical goods also started. Thus taking advantage of the war, the Indian bourgeoisie netted immense profits.

Despite this advance, in condition of colonial oppression it was very difficult for the Indian bourgeoisie to use their profits for expanded capitalist reproduction. They further failed to receive any practical assurance from the British Government for industrial development. They succeeded only in the appointment of the Industrial Commission as already stated and an assurance to stop further increase of excise duties on Indian textile products.

In consequence of industrial advance the number of factory workers also swelled during the war. In 1919, the large-scale industries of the country employed 1,367,000 workers. Of this, 306,300 were employed in 277 cotton spinning and weaving mills; 140,800 in 1,940 cotton ginning factories and 276,100 in 76 jute factories and presses. The railway shops employed 126,100 workers. Two-thirds of the factory workers were thus employed in three branches of the large-scale industry. The

coal industry also employed as many as 207,800 mining workers.⁴

The dire impoverishment of the working masses presented a striking contrast to the fabulous fortunes amassed by the colonialists and the upper strata of India's propertied classes. The war years impaired the condition of the factory proletariat. The intensified exploitation of the proletariat expressed itself mainly in speed-up. Soaring up of prices reduced the living standard of the working class. While the rural areas were affected by the rise of prices of manufactured goods, the towns faced higher food prices.

In 1918 a terrible epidemic of influenza swept the world. Thanks to utter indifference to public health and sanitation on the part of the imperialist government, 50 to 80 per cent of India's population fell under the grip of this epidemic. In one year, from June 1918 to 1919 it took a toll of 7,00,000 persons in India according to obviously minimised official statistics. This tragic death of millions must be traced back to the brutal exploitation of the Indian people by the British imperialists.

But in the final analysis, World War I, as it was significant for India's social and economic evolution, so it also opened up new vistas for organized and class-conscious struggles of the Indian proletariat.

Political Situation :

Following the tremendous repression resorted to put down the mass national movement of 1905-08, the British Government, as a sop to the growing anti-imperialist sentiments of the people, announced some administrative reforms, commonly known as Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909. But these nominal reforms failed to pacify the people. Although these were hailed by the moderate leadership of Congress, the section known as extremists held an opposite view.

Besides stipulating a provision for one Indian member each in the Executive Council and the Provincial Councils and some other minor changes, these reforms had nothing to do with the question of transferring power to the Indians. Moreover, the three main groups of electorate which were provided for the

Central Legislative Council also included electorate on communal basis.

Division of the electorate on communal basis was a cunning political device of the imperialist government to communally bifurcate the Indian people. Meanwhile, founding of Muslim League in 1906 under the leadership of Mr. Aga Khan, Nawab Salimulla of Dacca and Mohusin-ul-Mulk vouchsafed this communal theory. Muslim League supported Bengal partition as it bounteously came in favour of the Muslim Zamindars and vested interests. Separate electorate for the Muslims was also demanded by the Muslim League. By recognizing this demand, the Morley-Minto reforms formalized the communal theory of dividing Indian people into Hindus and Muslims.

Despite this excessively compromising attitude of the moderate leadership of Congress and viciously communal propaganda of Muslim League, the mass movement organized under the leadership of Tilak, Bipin Pal and other radical nationalists, though bound by its inherent limitations, achieved a significant success in the pre-war period in boldly establishing before the world the demand for independence of the Indian people.

The fatal blow which the First World War dealt on the world imperialist system and the deep economic crisis which it bred in the imperialist world and the tide of world revolution generated by the October Socialist Revolution of 1917 exerted a far-reaching effect on the national liberation movement of India as well as on the entire global development. Indian national movement assumed a wide and mass-based form and advanced.

As soon as the war began, the imperialist government in vindication of its alertness to keep the situation under its control detained the uncompromising section of the political workers invoking Defence of India Rules and several other special powers. But the Indian National Congress under moderate leadership, in all the four consecutive sessions since 1914, declared its loyalty to the imperialist government and extended support to the war-efforts. Mr. M. K. Gandhi also came down to London from South Africa and assured unconditional support of the Indian people to the war-efforts. Arriving in India in 1915, he went on persistently following this policy of active co-operation. At the end of the war, the Delhi session

of the Congress cabled congratulatory messages to the British Emperor for successful culmination of the war. All these gestures although were reciprocated by the British Government by a patronizing attitude towards Congress, the hope of self-government at the end of the war, so zealously nurtured by the moderates and Gandhiji, proved a sombre illusion.

The high-command's humility could not, however, restrain the rising mass-discontent at the base. Ghadr movement of Punjab and subsequent other events vindicated this mood of the masses. The government was wholly intolerant to any kind of opposition. Even the Home Rule for India League founded by Mr. Tilak in 1916 became an eyesore to the imperialists and they detained Mrs. Annie Basant, its president. In 1917 the British Government appointed Rowlatt Committee to enquire into 'the criminal conspiracies connected with the revolutionary movement in India', which recommended new repressive legislation providing arbitrary detention, imposition of restrictions on free movement of so-called 'suspected persons' and similar other autocratic measures. The Rowlatt Bill was passed into an Act in the face of stout opposition by the Indian people.

Fresh with the experiences of South Africa, Gandhiji by then had fully entered into Indian politics and took up the task of organizing passive resistance against Rowlatt Act and announced countrywide *hartal* (suspension of day's business) on 6 April, 1919 to be followed by '*Satyagraha*' (literally meaning 'persistence in truth' used as the method of passive resistance). The *hartal* was brilliantly successful, but at Delhi police opened fire on Hindu and Muslim demonstrators. Gandhiji was not allowed into Delhi, he was forced back to Bombay.

The extraordinary measures of repression climaxed in the ghastly massacre of Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar of Punjab on April 13 of that year. More than a thousand of men and women were brutally killed and several thousand more wounded when a contingent of British army under the command of General Dyer rained bullets upon a large gathering trapped in the walled Jallianwala Bagh. This was followed by proclamation of martial law, curfew orders, indiscriminate arrests and flogging—in a word, a complete reign of terror was let loose.

The whole of India was fired with deep hatred and anger against this savagery.

As usual with the tricky British imperialists, to counter-balance the repressions and to mitigate the rising temper of the people, on 20 August 1917 they hastily issued a declaration, known as the Montagu declaration after the name of the Secretary of the State at the time which proclaimed the aims of 'progressive realization of Responsible Government in India as an integral part of the British Empire' and promised 'substantial steps in this direction as soon as possible.'

The British Government tried to pacify the Indian people with these Reforms at a time when not only the stormy internal situation of India was causing alarm to the imperialists, the international scene too was undergoing a radical change threatening the so-long unchallenged sway of world imperialism. Birth of the first socialist State in the world in November 1917, the proclamation of the Irish Republic by the Sinn Fein party, Mustafa Kamal Pasha declaring war against Allied occupation and setting up a provisional government at Turkey, the Chinese refusal to sign the Treaty of Versailles and The May Fourth 1919 Movement of China—all these emerging forces stimulated the anti-imperialist movement in the colonies and semi-colonies and gravely weakened the clutches of imperialism.

But Montagu's declaration promising a Diarchy followed by the release of the Home Rule prisoners, though succeeded in mollifying the Moderates failed to win over the Extremists.

Gandhiji meanwhile was deeply attracted towards Khilafat movement and from that forum he declared non-co-operation with the government.

As the religion-based political philosophy of Muslim League and a section of the Congress wielded a retrograde influence on the Indian working class in shaping their class-consciousness, so was also the influence of Khilafat movement which in effect vitiated the class outlook of the Muslim workers. A deeper look into the genesis of Khilafat movement, its advancement and culmination will bear testimony to it.

The peace treaties of 1919 having belied the war aims of the Allies and 'the fourteen points' of President Wilson, a certain amount of sympathy for Germany which had tried to help the revolutionary movement in India, although as a part of

imperialist game, was evoked among the Indians. Appearing to proclaim as a rule of revenge, the Treaty of Versailles distributed the colonies of the vanquished among the victors, denied self-determination to central European peoples, imposed heavy burden of reparations on Germany and finally meted out a disastrous treatment to the Turkish Empire which in particular deeply shocked the Indians, especially the Muslim community. The Allies decided to dismember the Ottoman Empire. The Greek and Italian troops supported by the Allies landed at Turkey and heralded the destruction of Turkish Empire and the Caliphate. Muslims in general regarded Caliph as their religious head and looked upon the weakening of Caliph's position as gravely disadvantageous to the position of the Muslims in countries under imperialist domination. In India, the result was the birth of Khilafat movement.

A section of the Indian Muslim community decided to build up countrywide movement in order to force British Government to change its Turkish policy and do justice to the Sultan. And so the Khilafat Committee came into being under the leadership of Moulana Azad, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Hasarat Mohani. Gandhiji decided to lend support to this movement naively believing it to be a great opportunity to unite the Hindus and Muslims. Congress and Muslim League also extended support to this movement. But subsequently in 1922, with Kamal Pasha coming into the governance of Turkey and declaring Turkey as a secular State and the Caliph being stripped of all political power, the Khilafat movement in India lost all meaning.

Khilafat movement no doubt succeeded in inculcating a strong anti-British sentiment among a big section of the middle-class urban Muslims, but this movement in essence was based on religious appeal. And true to its religious character, the legendary heroes chosen from the West Asian Muslim sacred texts were idealized to inspire the movement. Within the limited periphery of Turkish issue, the movement though generated anti-British feelings, it did little to permeate the Muslim community with a truly anti-imperialist consciousness. This movement failed to take up the fundamental economic and political issues of the poorest strata of the Muslim community—the peasantry and the workers and direct its attack against the

main pillars of imperialist and feudal exploitation. So this movement, instead of contributing to the development of class-consciousness among the Muslim peasants and workers, sought to benumb their class senses with a religionist aroma. Simultaneously, the two-nation theory propounded by Muslim League and its indulgence in religious fanaticisms of medieval type, held a large section of the Muslim peasantry and workers practically aloof from the basic problems of imperialist rule and exploitation and sopped them with politico-religious ideas. The evolution of class-consciousness of the Indian workers is therefore to be examined in the background of a vicious influence exerted on them by Hindu revivalism on the one side and Muslim religious fanaticism on the other.

Anyway, the demand for justice to Turkey raised by a Hindu-Muslim combined delegation being meanwhile rejected by the Viceroy and the British Prime Minister Mr. Lloyd George as well, Gandhiji decided *Satyagraha* on the demand of Khilafat and non-co-operation movement started on 1 August 1920. But it needed the active support of Congress and in September of that year, the Calcutta session of Congress decided a programme of 'non-violent non-co-operation'. In 1920-21, unrest among the masses assumed formidable dimensions. 1.5 million workers participated in more than 200 strike-actions during the first half of 1920. Hard-pressed by economic crisis, the toiling masses took to the path of militant struggles. In his presidential address to the special session of Congress in September, Lala Lajpat Rai candidly said,⁵ 'It is no use blinking the fact that we are passing through a revolutionary period. . . We are by instinct and tradition averse to revolutions. Traditionally, we are slow-going people; but when we decide to move, we do move quickly and by rapid strides. No living organism can altogether escape revolutions in the course of its existence.'

Rajani Palme Dutt writes,⁶ 'The analysis of the President of the Congress was in its essential point correct. The declaration of the spokesman of the Congress was in fact a declaration that in the midst of 'a revolutionary period' a leadership 'by instinct and tradition averse to revolutions' was faced with the problem of leading the rising movement. Herein lay the contradiction of the post-war situation in India, as indeed in many

countries at that time wherein the political movement had not yet reached maturity corresponding to the opportunities unloosed by the war.'

Faced with such a situation, the Calcutta Special Session of the Congress declared its decision to go ahead with and intensify the non-violent non-co-operation movement till the realization of Swaraj and justice to Turkey. The policy envisaged successive stages, beginning with renunciation of decorative titles bestowed by the government and boycott of legislatures, law courts and educational institutions, and hand-spinning, leading up to the final stage of non-payment of taxes at some future date.

The immediate steps envisaged by the policy actually meant for the middle-class elements with the only role of 'hand-spinning in every house and hand-weaving' left for the masses. The non-payment of taxes which would involve mass of the peasantry was reserved for a future date. Although initially there was a bit of difference among the leadership on the question of boycotting the councils and subsequently resolved, the boycott movement was remarkably successful. The Nagpur Session in December 1920 added some constructive tasks like removal of untouchability, prohibition of liquor and imparting national education. Broadly speaking, Congress thus came to pass as the central political force among the masses of that time.

By the end of 1921, except Gandhiji, almost all the top ranking leaders were imprisoned. When the highly resentful people were eagerly awaiting a militant programme, Congress then declared a conditional programme of non-co-operation and Gandhiji himself promised Swaraj by 31 December 1921. Peoples' proneness to struggle found vent even in this non-co-operation. But not by non-co-operation alone, people's struggle burst forth through industrial workers' strike in different parts of the country, strike in Assam-Bengal Railway, no-tax movement at Midnapore, Moppala rebellion at Malabar and several other events.

The government made a bid to mitigate the bursting discontent of the people through the royal visit of the Prince of Wales, but it produced just an opposite result. On November 17 a countrywide general strike received the Prince of Wales.

Possibly this was the first political general strike of the Indian people organized on a national scale and it sharply gave vent to the anger of the people against British rule at an appropriate moment. This tremendously high anti-imperialist sentiment of the people met by brutal repressions from the colonial authorities, produced a number of bloody skirmishes between the people and the armed forces. People's militant actions altogether changed the character of the struggle.

Trustful of a completely different method of struggle, Gandhiji took alarm at this tide of militant struggle of the people and being the sole dictator of Congress with Mr. C. R. Das and other leaders thrown behind the prison bars, he declared that non-violent non-co-operation had failed in the urban centres and so from then on he would concentrate his activities in the rural areas. At the end of the year at Ahmedabad Congress, Gandhiji was vested with the sole authority to conduct individual and mass civil disobedience which in fact marked a point of retreat.

Gandhiji decided to try mass civil disobedience at Bardoli taluk in Gujarat. But before it was started, a mob violence occurred at Chouri Choura in U.P. where in reply to wanton police firing, a crowd of angry peasants set fire to a police station causing death of twentytwo policemen. This upset Gandhiji and a hastily summoned working committee decided at his insistence to abandon civil disobedience in view of 'the inhuman conduct of the mob at Chouri Choura'. This decision threw not only the masses into an utter state of perplexity, even the important Congress leaders of the stature of Motilal Nehru, Lajpat Rai, C. R. Das, Subhas Chandra Bose, and several others most of whom were behind the bars were struck with grave amazement and consternation.

Thus Gandhiji indiscreetly put a brake on the rising tempo of anti-imperialist struggle, which started with the political initiative of the masses in the post-war period and sought to keep it under rigid upper class control. The surging tide of mass movement receded. The shrewd imperialists breathed a sigh of relief but missed no opportunity to strike back. On March 10, Gandhiji was put under arrest.

Impact of Russian Revolution :

A world ravaged by the imperialist marauders and divided into antagonistic classes witnessed the birth of an absolutely new State and new society on 7 November 1917. Proving incontrovertibly the non-eternity of the rule of capitalism, and establishing on the earth, through bloody use of force, a socialist State under proletarian dictatorship—a dictatorship of the exploited majority against the exploiting minority, the socialist revolution of Russia marked a new epoch in world history. Overleaping the boundaries of Russia, the glowing brilliance of Marxian revolutionary theory as now translated into practice and the messages of Lenin, the greatest of the revolutionaries of all times, radiated throughout the world. Its impact greatly inspired the working classes of the Western capitalist countries in their fight for a socialist revolution and a proletarian State. Likewise it invigorated the struggles of the oppressed peoples of the colonies and semi-colonies with a renewed hope of liberation. The national liberation movement of India, her labour movement particularly were also marked with the inescapable influence of this world-shaking event. But the leadership of the Indian national movement remaining confined in the hands of the bourgeoisie and the working class having not yet attained a stage of political maturity and having not yet sufficiently organized, the implications of this revolution in the context of Indian national movement could not be as practical as it would have been in the context of a different balance of class forces. But the death-knell of world imperialism which this revolution sounded could not but objectively influence the Indian scene as elsewhere where the oppressed peoples were locked in life and death battles against imperialism.

Moreover, the trade union activities of the Indian labour, particularly the wave of strike-struggles conducted by them in the post-war period were visibly influenced by this proletarian revolution. Successively, with the first ray of Marxian political philosophy reaching India and an enlightened section of Indian society, though initially very small, having been imbued with this revolutionary doctrine, the influence of this revolution on the political scene of India began to be directly felt.

Working-Class Movement During and After War :

Although the tide of national movement receded at the dictate of Gandhiji and the Congress Working Committee, the economic struggles of the Indian labour, sometimes isolated and sometimes on a wider scale, broke out in different parts of the country against tremendous economic crisis and exorbitant price-rise brought in the wake of the war. These working-class actions not really divorced from political inspiration but interspersed with much of it, came to such a pass and so gravely alarmed the British Government that from London the Secretary of State for India telegraphically asked the Viceroy to send a report on the situation of labour movement. The telegram, betraying an overtone of nervousness, reads as follows :⁶

India is described by the newspapers in England as seething with industrial unrest. To what extent is this description correct ? Are the strikes being promoted by the Congress Party in their attempt to make Government impossible ? Can you give me a comprehensive account of the measures taken in connection with these strikes ? I would be in a position to say something on the subject.

The report submitted by the Viceroy in reply to this telegram gives an account of the prevailing labour situation. It stated *inter alia* :⁷

There is undoubtedly a considerable amount of industrial unrest in India, but it is an exaggeration to speak of the whole country as seething with such unrest and the position is by no means comparable with the present situation in England. The causes of the unrest are primarily economic. [1] The pressure of high prices, wages having risen very considerably in the past 12 months, but not uniformly and not having kept pace with prices. [2] The general belief that profiteering is freely practised by middlemen and retail dealers. [3] The knowledge that very large profits are being made by capitalists, mill-owners in particular. [4] The contrast between the comfort and wealth of the few, the comparative poverty of the mass of workers. [5] The general shortage of industrial labour which has recently been accentuated by the increased demand of rapidly expanding industrial establishments and aggravated by the ravages of influenza, the results of which have been most obvious in crowded towns and have in consequence kept away country labours. [6] The reluctance of employers to grant increase of pay till discontent with existing conditions has manifested itself in the shape of a strike.

Apart from these economic causes there is in the air a sort of epidemic strike fever partly engendered by world-wide politi-

cal unrest, partly fostered by the frequent reports of labour trouble in England and Europe, and also to some extent encouraged by the political agitators here. Although strikes in India have been frequent, the unrest is largely localized and sporadic. . . . The absence of any all-India combination of labour organizations and the trade union funds makes it comparatively difficult for labour movements of this type to be successful for prolonged period. On the other hand a large portion of the urban workers in India being recruited from the class of rural peasantry, strikers can always go back to their villages and this tends to prolong their power of resistance. It is difficult to say whether strikes are promoted by the Congress Party as a whole but we have information that the promoters of the non-co-operation movement recognize the efficacy of strike weapon in producing difficulties for Government and individual members of the party have certainly taken an active part in promoting labour unrest. Till now politicians have mostly come to the assistance of the strikers only after a strike has actually commenced. In Bombay and Madras there are, however, incohate organizations which are being nursed by politicians, e.g. Baptista in Bombay and Wadia in Madras though the latter pretends to have given up politics. Strikers are also encouraged by certain newspapers, notably the Bombay Chronicle. Much hope is based on such papers on the All India Trade Union Congress which meets in Bombay at the end of this month and will, it is said, be followed by special Railway Conference.

Despite belittling efforts, the official report could not, however, hide the actual state of affairs. The report confirms the advancement of Indian labour movement during the period, especially after the war and betrays a deep anxiety which the movement caused to the colonial rulers. The internal economic situation and the national political movement of India having been pointed out as the two basic factors giving rise to these labour struggles, the report does not fail to recognize the great inspiration which these movements drew from the world-wide political unrest and the European and English labour movement of that period. Although, the official report did not spell out the 'world-wide political unrest', there is hardly any difficulty to realize what it really meant. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the phenomenon of world-wide labour awakening that followed were the obvious implications. The real impact of these historic events on Indian labour did not escape the political insight of the shrewd imperialist government.

The report, while describing the struggles as localized and sporadic, takes due notice of the imminence of an all-India

organization of the workers. This in other words meant that overcoming the isolation and weakness so long suffered, the workers were then going to be organized on an all-India basis. This was obviously not a welcome development for the colonial government and so apprehensive of the approaching danger, they had to take some conciliatory attitude to meet the situation. About this, the report says:⁸

To meet discontent we have revised the pay of nearly all Government subordinates and menials and the additional expenditure on this account has amounted to not less than ten crores of rupees recurring. This has afforded considerable relief, but strikes have sometimes directly followed revision where extravagant demands have not been satisfied. A case in point is that of the Bombay Postal officials which is the most important strike pending at this moment. Similarly the strike in the Government presses followed the announcement of improved rates in July, but when efforts failed definitely to induce Government to reconsider the terms the men returned to work. As regards private industrial strikes, we endeavour to deal with each on its merit. In the majority of the cases it is desirable to let the parties settle their differences themselves. In other cases where we think such a course desirable and the moment opportune, we endeavour to induce the parties to come to settlement by reference to arbitration. This course has been followed with success at Ahmedabad and in several Madras cases. Local Governments notably Madras and Bombay are taking special measures to study and deal with economic unrest. In several instances the Governors have intervened with success when other measures have failed. There is general feeling that legislation on lines of English Industrial Courts Acts would be premature. We are recommending and popularising ideas of works committees and enlightened employers are following same lines. Our proposed factory legislation following Washington Conventions will also secure better conditions for labour apart from wages. Our Central Labour Bureau is active in collecting as well as distributing facts and suggestions realizing that employers want education as much as workers regarding the advantages of fair treatment of labour.

The report is fairly indicative of the character of labour unrest brewing in various industrial sectors, both government and private and the attempts of the government to keep it under control by way of some concessions and measures of conciliation as well. But impelled by economic distress and inspired by national and world events, the working-class struggles surmounted all impediments and burst forth throughout the country. The erstwhile sporadic character of the

struggles had also been gathering cohesion. Workers' consciousness was getting more sharpened and the leadership's outlook far more heightened.

This period, the year 1920 in particular marked a very important moment in the history of Indian labour. In the background of a turbulent political struggle of the Indian people and all-pervading labour unrest following the war, the year 1920 saw the birth of the first all-India Trade Union Congress. This organization did not come into being only out of the good efforts of some leaders and well-wishers. The incessant struggles of the Indian workers which unsparingly shook the industrial centres of the country prepared and fertilized the soil on which germinated this organization.

The official records bear sufficient testimony to the pervasive and unceasing character of struggles of this period. Avoiding cumbersome details, even a sketch of some of these struggles, as shown in the following pages, will be quite confirmatory.⁹

Besides, Government of India records show some more strikes around 1920. Reports about a few bigger ones are reproduced below:¹⁰

The Government of the United Provinces has reported that a strike commenced on the 16th October in the Locomotive Deptt. and on the 19th October in the carriage and Wagon Deptt. of the Great Peninsular Railway at Jhansi. About 5,000 men are involved. No specific demands have been formulated but the main grievance of the strikers is reported to be that the Locomotive Department workmen got no extra pay for overtime, while the other departments do. This question was submitted to the agent sometime ago but orders have not been passed on it. The Carriage and Wagon department came out only in sympathy with or under pressure from the Locomotive department. . . . According to a press report, dated the 27th October the workmen of the running shed have also struck for sympathy. Another report dated October 30th states that the Arbitration Board has issued its award.

About Madras the report states:¹¹

The Commissioner of Labour of Madras has reported that the employees of the Buckingham Mills at Perambur, numbering about 5,260 were locked out on the 21st October, 1920 in view of the assaults on the Weaving master and the generally turbulent behaviour of the workmen, following upon trouble over promotions and dismissal . . . Press reports: Seven hundred workmen are said to be affected by the lockout. According to press reports dated the 26th October a bulletin has been issued by the Madras Labour

Labour Strikes in India in 1920

Place	Concern	No. of operatives involved	Remarks
Madras	Madras Tramways	1,400	The strike was settled after increase of wages and other relief.
Madura	Madura Mills	Not known	Returned to work unconditionally.
Jamalpur	East India Railway Workshop	10,300	Returned to work unconditionally.
Patna	Patna Law Press	70	Returned to work on wages being increased.
Muzaffarpur	Postal employees	Not known	Amicably settled.
Hingaghat	Rai Sahib Rock Chand Mehta Mills	1,000	Settled after enhancement of grain allowance.
Nagpur	Empress Mills	5,000	Settled after increase of wages.
Bareilly	Rohilkhand and Kumaun Railway	600	Settled after increase of wages.
Saharanpur	North Western Railway	1,500	Returned to work on assurance to remedy grievances.
Jhansi	Great Indian Peninsular Workshop	Not known	Settled amicably.
Allahabad	Pioneer Printing Press	746	Returned to work after some concessions.
Cawnpore	Elgin Mills, Woollen Mills, Victoria Mills, Muir Mills, Cawnpore Cotton Mills, Ganges Jute Mills, Flour Mills, Copper Allen and Company, The Tannery Empire Engineering Company.	20,000	Settled after increase of wages, payment of bonus and shortening of working hours.
Do	Elgin Mills	2,425	Settled on increase of wages and certain other assurances.
Do	Woollen Mills	2,000	Settled amicably.
Do	Victoria Mills	500	Returned to work after fortnightly payment of wages assured.

Place	Concern	No. of operatives involved	Remarks
Do	Cotton Mills	5,500	Settled on increase of wages and payment of bonus.
Do	Copper Allen & Co.	5,200	Settled on payment and increase of bonus.
Do	Tannery	600	Amicably settled.
Do	Empire Engineering Co.	800	Settled after a small increase of wages.
Do	Harness Factory	3,000	Returned to work after increase of wages.
Do	Jajman Mills	500	Settled on increase of pay.
Do	Hafiz Halim Tannery	300	Do
Do	Swadeshi Cotton Mills	600	Settled amicably.
Calcutta	Masons	10,000	Settled on increase of wages.
Kulti	Bengal Iron & Steel Works	11,000	Do
Howrah	Ghusuri, New Central,		Returned to work on
Do	Ganges, Fort William & Howrah Jute Mills	27,000	assurance to increase wages and settle other grievances.
Do	8 Presses and		
	M/S. Parry & Co.	300	Do
Calcutta	M/S. Graham & Co.	100	Returned unconditional-ly.
Do	Taxi drivers	1,200	Settled amicably.
Do	Rikshaw Pullers	300	Do
Bombay	Cotton Spinning and	135,000	Settled after increase of
City	Weaving		allowances, reduction of working hours and other minor concessions.
Do	Dye Works	1,842	Do
Do	Mackenzie Saw Mills	350	Settled on increase of wages.
Do	Royal Indian Marine Dockyard	4,175	Do
Do	Bombay Port Trust Workshops	3,500	Do
Do	Bombay Port Trust Workers (Tally Clerks, Coolies, Cranemen)	3,075	Settled on increase of wages.

Place	Concern	No. of operatives involved	Remarks
Do	Times of India	200	Settled after grant of allowance.
Do	Some small factories	3,000	Settled on increase of wages and allowances.
Do	Bombay Municipality	300	Settled on increase of wages.
Do	P & O and B.I.S.N. Company Dockyard	6,000	Settled on increase of wages and grant of bonus.
Do	Oil Installation	1,688	Settled on grant of allowances.
Do	Tramway Co. Workshop, Dadar	1,500	Settled on increase of wages.
Do	Railway Workers	700	Settled on increase of wages.
Sholapur	Cotton Mills	13,600	Strike still unsettled.
Barsi	Do	565	Do
Poona	Copper Smiths	150	Settled on increase of wages.
Ahmedabad	Do	4,822	Settled on increase of wages and bonus.
Godhra	Municipal Sweepers	113	Settled on increase of grain compensation allowance.
Do	Post & Telegraph Peons	Not known	Settled on increase of wages.
Karachi	Coolies of Stevedores at Karachi	600	Not known.

Union stating that the weaving master, Mr. Bentley, lost his temper with certain weavers who pleaded with him on the subject of permanent men and promotion of temporary men which he had effected and he drew a revolver. The weavers, says the bulletin, caught hold of Mr. Bentley's hand, whereupon he threw his revolver down and left the place. The revolver was picked up by one of the weavers and Mr. Wadia, president of the Labour Union was called in, took charge of the revolver and accompanied by some of the men, went to the High Court for legal advice.

The same report mentions strikes of the Gas Workers of Bombay and Calcutta and Tramwaymen of Bombay, but details of these strikes are not available.

As an evidence of intensity and extent of the strikes of this period Dr. R. K. Das, has quoted the following figures :¹²

November 4 to December 2, 1919, woollen mills, Cawnpore, 17,000 men out ; December 7, 1919, to January 9, 1920, railway workers, Jamalpur, 16,000 men out ; January 9-18, 1920, jute mills, Calcutta, 35,000 men out ; January 2 to February 3, general strike, Bombay, 200,000 men out ; January 20-31, millworkers, Rangoon, 20,000 men out ; January 31, British India Navigation Company, Bombay, 10,000 men out ; January 26 to February 16, millworkers, Sholapur, 16,000 men out ; February 24 to March 29, Tata Iron and Steel workers, 40,000 men out ; March 9, mill workers, Bombay, 60,000 men out ; March 20-26, millworkers, Madras, 17,000 men out ; May, 1920, millworkers, Ahmedabad, 25,000 men out.

Some of the facts mentioned by Dr. Das, with a little variance, are also on record in the official report already cited. The prolonged strike of 200,000 Bombay workers, out of whom 125,000 were textile workers, lasting from January 2 to February 3, 1920 was unprecedented in the history of Indian labour. Out of 85 textile mills of Bombay, workers of as many as 80 mills joined this strike and a total of 5,400 mandays were lost.

Strike action then spread out like the waves of a turbulent sea. Workers employed in Railway, Port, Dock, Engineering workshops, Oil installations, Government Mint, Press, Tramways, Gas and Electricity supply and even the Municipal workers—in a word, the working class as a whole joined these strikes which were launched mainly for securing increase of wages to meet the rising cost of living.

Remarkably, the strike-waves hit almost all the industrial centres of the country. As in Bombay, so in Madras, Bengal, Bihar, Assam and in several other places workers' strikes were of unforeseen nature. In Madras alone 16 major strikes occurred during this period while Bengal, Bihar and Assam witnessed 8 major strikes each.¹³ The postmen's strike of Calcutta in May 1919 was specially impressive.

On a further analysis it appears that beginning from 1917, the incidence of strikes was on an increasing order, the strikes in 1918 being more numerous than those in the previous year—52 strikes being recorded in the first six months of 1918 in Bombay alone, while in the month of October alone in 1919, 38 major strikes and two lock-outs occurred in India involving 1,250,000 workers. The most important working-class action of this year was the Bombay textile workers' general strike

in the month of January. 150,000 workers were involved in it. But the strikes in 1920 were more frequent and involved many more workers causing loss of a greater number of mandays. In the first two months of that year, 110 strikes occurred in the jute and cotton mills only involving 2,475,000 workers.

The aforesaid major strikes included, the available reports speak of 62 strikes occurring in Madras Presidency involving 42,126 workers during 1920.¹⁴ In Bengal, according to collected records 110 strikes occurred only in second-half of that year which involved 211,478 workers.¹⁵ Besides jute mills, the strikes affected other industries also especially engineering, metal, transport, coal and printing presses.

The strike in the Government of India Press in Calcutta in July 1920 assumed special importance. The strikes which soon spread to Government Presses at Delhi and Simla, took place on the demands of wage increase and repeal of retrograde changes in the service condition.

The Railway workers too kept pace with the rising tempo of movement. Especially remarkable was the strike of 16,000 workers at Jamalpur Railway workshop mentioned by Dr. R. K. Das. In the North Western Railway also a big strike occurred during this period.

What has been stated above is by no means comprehensive. Although a part of the story, it enables one to realize the extent of labour unrest during the period. It can be safely asserted that none of the industries of Indian sub-continent was free from strike during the latter half of 1920. Strike became a part and parcel of industrial life.

This countrywide and militant class struggle of the Indian proletariat thus succeeded in laying the firm foundation of Indian trade union movement and modern trade unions and above all, the all-India class-organization of the Indian proletariat came into being in this massively fighting process. Pointing this out, Rajani Palme Dutt said,¹⁶ 'These were the conditions in which Indian trade unionism was born. Most of the Indian trade unions in the main industries and centres derive from this period. . . This great period of militancy saw the birth of modern Indian labour movement.'

Grave Economic Exploitation :

The outbreak of great industrial strife following the war

was a militant protest of the Indian working class against the grave economic miseries imposed upon it by way of price-rise, low wages, long hours and other extortive measures in a totally contrasting background of rising profits of the British and Indian capitalists. Even an official Commission like that of the Royal Commission on Labour in India was constrained to admit that,¹⁷ 'Behind immediate causes . . . , it is possible to trace the wider influences which have been at work. The great outbreak of strife after the war had obvious economic causes, a rise in wage levels was overdue, and the workers awoke to the disabilities from which they suffered in respect of long hours and other matters.'

The war provided a golden opportunity to the mill-owners to reap fabulous profits. Share markets transacted exciting business. Industrial shares received high dividends and its price rose to peak heights. The cotton and jute mill-owners felt the strongest impulse of this boom. The profits of the textile manufacturers rose to 200 per cent or more in some cases, the highest figure reported being 265 per cent¹⁸ In the jute mill industry of Bengal, out of 44 mill companies whose dividends were declared in 1918, thirty-three paid 200 per cent or more, and only nine (including two new concerns) paid less than 7 per cent.¹⁹ Another source revealed that the leading Gouripore Jute Mills paid 250 per cent in 1918 and 420 per cent in 1919.²⁰ Further, 41 jute mills owned by the Europeans, with a total capital investment of £6 million, recorded profits of nearly £23 million for the four years from 1918 to 1921 in addition to a £19 million carried over to the reserve fund.²¹

But the other side represented an altogether different picture. The workers had no share in this tremendous prosperity of the industrialists. On the contrary, they had to face a harder lot. The war and its legacy rewarded the workers with a steep rise in the cost of living index. Outbreak of the war shot up the prices of foodgrains by an average 93 per cent. Rise in respect of other necessities was 190 per cent for imported goods and over 60 per cent for indigenous products.²²

Heroic struggles of the workers succeeded in many cases to secure wage increases, yet these increases were never in proportion to the rise in prices. The disparity was so naked that commenting on the situation, no less an arch-imperialist

than the Secretary of State for India himself had to observe,²³ 'As the prices rose remarkably high, many an increase of wages which look all right on paper proves to have in fact little influence in easing the hard lot of the labourers.'

For a hard-core imperialist ruler to make such a comment may seem surprising, but it signifies the depth of the calamity. And it was due entirely to the policy of the imperialists themselves. Wage-statistics in some principal industries will make the situation materially understandable.

In 1914, the average monthly wages in the Buckingham & Carnatic Mills, Madars stood at Rs. 10-6 annas, and while the cost of living in 1919 rose by 75 per cent above that of 1919, the increase in average wages during the same period was only 41.5 per cent. This position is confirmed by the Company's own statistics.²⁴

In the jute mill industry of Bengal, while the price index in 1920 rose by a little more than 100 per cent over that of 1914, the average wages during the same period marked an increase of 40 per cent only. In the condition of similar rise in price indices, the wages at the Tata Iron & Steel Works of Jamshedpur rose by only 10 per cent and 40 per cent in the years 1917 and 1920 respectively.²⁵

Mr. N. M. Joshi estimated the increase in the cost of living index at Bombay in 1919 to be not less than 75 per cent which also very much approximated to the conservative official figures.²⁶ But according to Bombay Mill-Owners' Association, the Bombay textile workers despite going through their first general strike in the same year secured an wage-increase between 35 and 40 per cent only. The reality is this that after declaration of the first war bonus in 1918 at the rate of 10 per cent, the increase of wages did not exceed 15 per cent in any case.

This was the magnitude of exploitation against which the Indian working class stood in concerted actions in the immediate post-war years.

The gains secured by the workers through these struggles were, however, by no means negligible. Rather, the increase in wages won during this period was greater than the total rise achieved during the last thirty years. Another demand which made the workers restive was for a Ten-Hour Day. So

long the employers, in practice, obeyed no limitation of working hours. The workers achieved notable success in this direction. According to Dr. R. K. Mukherjee the embodiment of the 50-hour week in the Indian Factory Act of 1922 represented little more than enforcement on industry in general of a principle won by the strikers.²⁷

Leadership and Organization of the Trade Unions :

Absence of any proper organization so long frittered away much of the energy of the workers and contributed to the defeat of the struggles in many cases. But the frequency of the strikes during 1919-20 and the success achieved in a good number of them more emphatically upheld the necessity of proper organization and inspired the workers and their leaders to move in that direction. In fact, some of the strikes of this period indicated a rapid evolution of appropriate organizational structure that was essentially needed for conducting big actions. The Bombay Industrial Disputes Committee was impressed by the novelty of organization of the textile workers, as evidenced during their general strike in January 1919. As quoted by *Times of India*, the Committee observed²⁸ that 'the rapidity and regularity with which the 1919 Bombay general strike, involving 150,000 workers from nearly all the textile mills in the city, developed and spread from day-to-day, and for their cohesion, because cohesion there certainly was suggests the existence of an organization and plan of a kind that is novel in Bombay.'

Besides the Bombay textile workers' strike, cases of concerted action, involving larger number of workers, became more frequent, sometimes more orderly and certainly more successful. No longer limited to single groups or departments within a factory, they came to affect groups of mills, even all the mills of a given industry. Thus objective condition fully warranted the birth of modern trade unions capable of guiding the big struggles that were developing. Trade unions of this period, thus, started acquiring regular membership, funds, elected bodies and other modern attributes signifying a new stage in the structural evolution of Indian trade unions.

As has already been said, from the beginning, a section of the intelligentsia and professionals from the middle stratum of

the society devoted themselves to the task of organizing workers' economic struggles and this phenomenon continued to exist even during this period. Of course, in the modern period also, middle stratum intellectuals dominate the top leadership of many of the trade unions, but there is a fundamental difference in this respect between the early and the modern period. Now, a big section of these middle-class organizers have themselves been de-classed and have become firm believers in the theory of class struggle and proletarian revolution and so their reoriented class outlook coincides with that of the working class itself. These educated and enlightened middle class organizers, so long they remain deeply imbued with the idea of scientific socialism and proletarian methodology and do not deviate, can be of immense help to the workers themselves in bringing enlightenment to them and raising their class political consciousness. Socialist consciousness does not arise spontaneously, it has to be brought to the workers from without. This is a historically attested necessity. In asserting the historicity of this phenomenon, Lenin wrote:²⁹

The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia.

This is what Lenin implied about infusion of socialist consciousness into the working class. But the response to socialist ideas is not evoked uniformly from the working class as a whole. In this respect there is a difference between the advanced strata of the proletariat and the less advanced. Drawing lesson from the history of working-class movement on the relationship between these two strata in regard to assimilation of socialist ideas, Lenin further wrote:³⁰

The history of the working-class movement in all countries shows that the better-situated strata of the working class respond to the ideas of socialism more rapidly and more easily. From among these come, in the main, the advanced workers that every working-class movement bring to the fore, those who can win the confidence of the labouring masses, who devote themselves entirely to the

education and organization of the proletariat, who accept socialism consciously, and who even elaborate independent socialist theories. Every viable working-class movement has brought to the fore such working-class leaders, its own Proudhons, Vaillants, Weitlings, and Bebel.

These are the historical lessons about inculcation of socialist ideas into the working class and evolution of its own leaders. In India, right from the commencement of the workers' struggle, the leadership was in the hands of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals and the outlook of these leaders greatly influenced the consciousness of the proletariat. Philanthropists, nationalists, 'pure and simple' trade-unionists, petty-bourgeois liberals of various hues had been dominating the labour scene since its inception. These early leaders' contribution to the initial development of the Indian trade union movement is a fact undeniable and the history of Indian labour remains incomplete without acknowledging their great initial drive. But this acknowledgement does not, however, obviate or preclude the other reality of binding down the working class to narrow trade union politics of the petty-bourgeoisie. Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from outside the economic struggle or more precisely, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. Political knowledge can be obtained only from 'the sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of interrelations between *all* classes.'³¹ This is where the middle-class trade union organizers stumbled. They could not rise above sheer economism and kept the workers' movement bogged down to the sphere of relations between workers and employers. Pointing out this contradiction of the early Indian labour movement, R. P. Dutt wrote: ³²

While the workers were ready for struggle, the facilities for office organization were inevitably in other hands. Hence arose the contradiction of the early Indian labour movement. There was not yet any political movement on the basis of socialism, of the conceptions of the working class and the class struggle. In consequence, the so-called 'outsiders' or helpers from other class elements who came forward, for varying reasons, to give their assistance in the work of organization, and whose assistance was in fact indispensable in this initial period, came without understanding of the aims and needs of the labour movement, and brought with them the conceptions of middle class politics. Whether their aims were philanthropic, as in some cases, careerist, as in others, or actuated by

devotion to the national political struggle, as in others, they brought with them an alien outlook, were incapable of guiding the young working-class movement on the basis of class struggles which the workers were in fact waging. This misfortune long dogged the Indian labour movement, seriously hampering the splendid militancy and heroism of the workers; and its influences still remain.

Absolute domination of these influences actually remained unbroken till the inflow of socialist ideas in India in the 1920's. Having imbibed the idea of scientific socialism and getting inspired for action by the victorious Russian Revolution, a small group of young Indian intellectuals entered the labour scene in the 1920's and boldly endeavoured to channelize the workers' movement in a different direction, the direction of sharpening class struggle and bringing class political consciousness into the labour movement. This marked a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of leadership of the Indian labour movement and set in motion a new dynamism, the struggle between the forces of revolution and reformism with far-reaching historical significance.

The process of growth of organization and leadership of Indian trade unions is therefore to be viewed in an appreciation of the interworking of these laws of social development.

A special study of the growth of two of the prominent labour unions of this period which may be of some help to follow the intricate course of Indian trade union movement is done hereunder.

Madras Labour Union :

Foundation of Madras Labour Union in 1918 by Mr. B. P. Wadia was conventionally assumed to be the starting-point of Indian trade union movement. Historical impropriety of this assumption is obvious, but the fact of coming into being of this union is significant in so far as the Madras Labour union was certainly the first systematic attempt at forming modern trade union organization in India.

But the circumstances which brought Mr. Wadia in touch with the workers show that he was actually impelled by humanitarian feeling, and not by any ideological determination to organize working-class movement. Mr. Wadia who was an associate of Mrs. Annie Besant was brought into the labour movement by a mere accident.

How this accident took place has been described by Mr. B. Shiva Rao:³³

Until the end of the Great war in 1918 there was no real organization among the industrial workers of India. . . . in April of that year, occurred a small accident in Madras which seemed to be the signal for the industrial workers in all the main industrial centres of India to organize themselves to obtain better economic condition. Two youngmen who had interested themselves for some time in social and religious work among the textile workers of Madras, visited the office of *New India*, the late Dr. Annie Besant's now defunct daily paper, to seek the advice and co-operation of Mr. B. P. Wadia, her assistant editor. Mr. Wadia was a politician with somewhat radical leanings. . . .

The political movement in India was at this time showing signs of reaction after the hectic propaganda in favour of Home Rule in the latter half of the period of the war. For Mr. Wadia and his associates this appeal for help from the industrial workers seemed to come at a psychological hour and proved irresistible . . . Mr. Wadia grasped this opportunity without much hesitation, when it came unsought, for establishing contacts with the textile workers of Madras. He listened to the descriptions of two men who had approached him to enlist his support for a workers' organization in the city—'the few minutes for food' at the midday interval, 'swallowing a few morsels and running back lest they be shut out.'

Mr. Wadia went with his new acquaintances to the mill gates and watched the scene. And that time, the Factories Act in India permitted twelve hours' working day with half-an-hour interval for food and rest. A decision was quickly taken, and that evening Mr. Wadia addressed a meeting of a few hundred workers from the mills.

Thus Madras Labour Union came into being on April 27, 1918 and Mr. B. P. Wadia accidentally happened to be its founder and first president. Paradoxically Mr. B. Shiva Rao who narrated this accident, himself also joined labour movement accidentally. In his own words, 'By an accident I was brought into intimate association with the first organized trade union in India, the Madras Textile Workers' Union, towards the end of 1918.'³⁴ The two youngmen referred to above, approaching Mr. Wadia, were Messrs. G. Ramanajulu Naidu and G. Chelvapathi Chetti who remained associated with the union for a long time and eventually became its general secretaries.³⁵

Mr. Shiva Rao has compared the work of Mr. Wadia with that of Mr. Lokhunday of Bombay during the eighties and nineties of the last century. But the gap of nearly four decades effected considerable change in the objective conditions which

enabled Mr. Wadia to accomplish what Mr. Lokhunday was unable to do.

Although accompanied with many initial imperfections, it is Madras Labour Union which heralded the birth of modern trade union in India. The system of regular membership and collection of membership dues was introduced for the first time. Monthly subscription of one anna was fixed. At first, membership was confined to factory workers alone, then it was extended even to the tramwaymen and rickshawpullers and in fact workers of any industry could obtain membership of this Union, although the textile workers predominated.

Noticeably, this union was born in a relatively weaker centre of Indian labour movement. In comparison to Madras, labour movement was much wider in Bombay and Bengal. During the whole period of 1921-23, whereas the number of strike days in Madras was 2.8 million, the same for Bombay and Bengal were 60 million and 20 million respectively.³⁶ The birth of this Union therefore indicates more its personal and accidental character than a natural consequence in the course of general development of Indian trade union movement. With this background in view, it would be historically wrong to over-emphasize the influence of this union on the general course of labour movement of India as a whole.

Having formed this union, the founders devoted themselves to the task of promoting Co-operative societies, Library, Reading-room and other labour welfare measures.

Subsequently, a memorandum demanding extension of mid-day recess of existing 40 minutes to one hour, increase of wage by 25 per cent, better treatment by European officers towards the labourers, doing away with racial feelings and payment of wages on the 7th of each month was submitted to the Management.³⁷ But the appalling limitation of the outlook of Mr. Wadia revealed itself when in absence of any response from the management towards these grievances, the workers pressed for a strike and Mr. Wadia opposed it on the ground of his loyalty towards British imperialism and in a speech on July 3, 1918 frankly stated:³⁸

If by going on strike you are affecting the pockets of Messrs. Binny & Co. I would not mind for they are making plenty of money, but by such a step you will injure the cause of the Allies. Our soldiers, who have to be clothed, will be put to inconvenience

and we have no right to trouble those who are fighting our King's battles, because a few Europeans connected with the mills and this Government are acting in a bad manner. Therefore, we must have no strikes.

This loyalty of Mr. Wadia was, however, reciprocated by the European management by a lock-out of the mills in October 1918. On December 10, Rev. C. F. Andrews arrived on the scene with instructions from Gandhiji and on the former's intervention the mills reopened on the conditions of payment of seven days' wages for the lock-out period as an act of grace and not as a legal right, no reference to arbitration of the points of dispute, and no reinstatement of the dismissed persons. A good reward for the workers indeed for their leader's loyalty to British imperialism and opposition to militant struggle!

The distressingly reformist and constitutionalist outlook of Mr. Wadia was further exposed when he stated that,³⁹ 'the only means of avoiding the exploitation is to enable the Indian labour to send its own representatives to the provincial councils and let all matters relating to his welfare and betterment be in the hands of responsible elected representatives who have the confidence of the labourers.'

This highly limited and constitutionalist outlook of Mr. Wadia and his contemporaries in the formative period of organized trade union movement in India resulted in sham dependence of these leaders only on speeches in public bodies—both national and international and enactment of laws, getting themselves, divorced from the onward march of workers' militant struggles.

In September 17, Mr. Wadia was invited to Glasgow Trade Union Congress as a fraternal delegate. He addressed that Congress and presented a memorandum on behalf of the Madras workers. Joint Parliamentary Committee in London was then considering the Indian Reform Bill. Mr. Wadia demanded before that Committee representation of labour in the legislative bodies of India.

Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association : A Gandhian Model :

Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association, locally known as Majoor Mahajan was founded in 1918 by Gandhiji. Credited as being the direct creation of Gandhiji, this Association distinctly reflects the Gandhian thoughts on the problems

of labour and employer-employee relations and the methods of tackling it. In consideration of Gandhiji's position in the political and social movements of India, the necessity of a proper understanding of his outlook on labour need hardly be emphasized.

Just back from South Africa, Gandhiji devoted himself to the task of organizing the first non-co-operation movement under the banner of Indian National Congress. Right at this moment he also happened to come in contact with the mill-workers of Ahmedabad. Gandhiji himself has narrated this incident of his involvement in labour problems. He writes :⁴⁰

. . . I received a letter from Sjt. Mohanlal Pandya and Shankarlal Parikh telling me of the failure of crops in the Kheda district, and asking me to guide the peasants, who were unable to pay the assessment. . .

At the same time there came a letter from Shrimati Anasuyabai about the condition of labour in Ahmedabad. Wages were low, the labourers had long been agitating for an increment, and I had a desire to guide them if I could. But I had not the confidence to direct even this comparatively small affair from that long distance. So I seized the opportunity to go to Ahmedabad. . .

I was in a most delicate situation. The mill-hands' case was strong. Shrimati Anasuyabai had to battle against her own brother, Sjt. Ambalal Sarabhai, who led the fray on behalf of the mill-owners. My relations with them were friendly, and that made fighting with them the more difficult. I had consultation with them, and requested them to refer the dispute to arbitration, but they refused to recognize the principle of arbitration.

I had therefore to advise the labourers to go on strike. Before I did so, I came in very close contact with them and their leaders, and explained to them the conditions of a successful strike :

1. never to resort to violence,
2. never molest blacklegs,
3. never to depend upon alms, and
4. to remain firm, no matter how long the strike continued, and to earn bread, during the strike, by any other honest labour. . .

The strike went on for twentyone days. During the continuance of the strike I consulted the mill-owners from time to time and entreated them to do justice to the labourers. 'We have our pledge too,' they used to say, 'our relations with the labourers are those of parents and children . . . How can we brook the interference of a third party ? Where is the room for arbitration ?'

This is how Gandhiji came in touch with the workers and founded the Ahmedabad Labour Association. The method

idealized by him for resolving labour disputes, was that of arbitration.

Gandhiji preached the ideology of this Association as the guiding force of all labour organizations. 'If I had my way,' wrote Gandhiji, 'I would regulate all the Labour organizations of India after the Ahmedabad model. . . .'⁴¹ This model is obviously quite at variance with that universally followed in trade union movement.

The main characteristic of this model is arbitration machinery. The principles of arbitration were manifestly borne out by the Ahmedabad textile workers' strike of 1918 and the method of settling it.

Faced with a condition of dearth of labour caused by plague epidemic, the Ahmedabad mill-owners had been paying the workers a bonus as high as 70 to 80 per cent of the wages since August 1917. The owners having suddenly stopped payment of this bonus in January 1918, the workers put forward a demand of 50 per cent additional allowance.

An arbitration board was appointed with Gandhiji as the workers' representative and 'he made an effort to understand the mill-owners' side and came to the conclusion that a demand for only 35 per cent increase would be just.'⁴² In the long drawn-out strike, the mill-owners were agreeable to compromise on this amount 'if Gandhiji would promise to keep himself away from the workers for all times in future, and would leave matters between them and the workers entirely to them.'⁴³

Gandhiji did not agree to this condition and in consequence the mill-owners declared a lock-out on February 22, 1918 and intended to let in those workers who would accept 20 per cent bonus.

Naturally in this condition the strike tended to further prolong. 'For the first two weeks the mill-hands exhibited great courage and self-restraint. . . .' writes Gandhiji, 'But at last they began to show sign of flagging.'⁴⁴

Then the question was to keep up the morale of the workers. Gandhiji writes: 'one morning—it was a mill-hands' meeting—while I was still groping and unable to see my way clearly, the light came to me. Unbidden and all themselves the word came to my lips: unless the strikers rally, I declared to the meeting, and continue the strike till a settlement is

reached, or till they leave the mills altogether, I will not touch my food.'¹⁵ Thus Gandhiji placed himself above the collective strength of the workers, and instead of trying to raise their flagging morale by widening the struggle and mobilizing popular support behind it, started individual fasting.

But his fast was not intended to put pressure on the mill-owners, which eventually so resulted into. He explains,⁴⁶ 'My fast was not free from a grave defect. . . . I enjoyed very close and cordial relations with the mill-owners, and my fast could not but affect their decision. . . . With the mill-owners I could only plead; to fast against them would amount to coercion'. Gandhiji continues,⁴⁷ 'The net result of it was that an atmosphere of goodwill was created all round. The hearts of mill-owners were touched and they set about discovering some measures for a settlement. . . . Sjt. Anandashankar Dhruva intervened and was in the end appointed arbitrator, and the strike was called off after I had fasted only for three days. The mill-owners commemorated the event by distributing sweets among the labourers, and thus a settlement was reached after 21 days' strike.'

The compromise solution recommended by Mr. Dhruva stipulated reduction of the workers' demand by 7½ per cent and increase of the mill-owners' offer by 7½ per cent and thus a net increase in workers' wages by 27½ per cent.

Following these principles of arbitration of the disputes between labour and capital, the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners' Association in a resolution adopted on April 4, 1920 appointed a permanent Arbitration Board consisting of one nominee from each of the two sides. The mechanism of arbitration of the Board as quoted in the report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India was decided to be as follows:⁴⁸

In the Ahmedabad Cotton mill industry it has been mutually agreed between the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners' Association and the Ahmedabad Labour Union that all grievances should, in the first instance, be discussed between the workers themselves and the management of the mills concerned. If any worker has a grievance, he reports to a member of the council of representatives from his mill. The member speaks to the head of the department and the agent of the mill, if necessary. If the grievance is not redressed a formal complaint is recorded with the Labour Union. The Labour Union official—usually the Secretary or the Assistant Secretary—goes to the mill officer or the agent to redress the grievances. If

no settlement is arrived at during the stage, the matter is reported by the Labour Union to the Mill-Owners' Association. The Secretary of the Mill-Owners' Association speaks to the mill concerned and tries to settle the matter amicably. The procedure in connection with grievances of a general nature referring to several mills or several workers in a mill are also similarly dealt with. If the workers do not get redress after the matter has been discussed between the Mill-Owners' Association and the Labour Union, the matter is finally referred to the Permanent Arbitration Board.

This was the ideal method of resolving labour-owner disputes as propounded and practised by Gandhiji.

Gandhiji formulated and concretized his ideas on labour-owner relationship on the occasion of this strike of the Ahmedabad Textile workers. One of Gandhiji's staunchest followers, Mr. J. B. Kripalani writes,⁴⁹ 'He considered them (the workers—author) partners, working for the public good. He considered mill-owners as trustees. Any quarrel between them, he held, must be settled through arbitration mutually agreed upon. He also laid down the functions of trade unions. His conception of the work of trade unions was that they were not merely to agitate for their rights, and organize strikes. The members had also to work for their own social advancement and that of the members of their families. For the purpose he placed before them schemes of constructive work, such as the organization of creches, day schools for the education of their children and night classes for the adults, prohibition etc. In this work he was helped by Shankarlal Bankar and Anasuyabehn, the sister of the leading mill-owner Ambalal Sarabhai. For years they worked to build the Ahmedabad Mill Mazdoor Union. It came to be the strongest union in the country. This resulted in good relations between the textile workers and the mill-owners of Ahmedabad.'

Gandhiji considered the owners as trustees. Defining Gandhiji's doctrine of trusteeship, Mr. Kripalani further writes,⁵⁰ 'It works in all spheres of life. The parents act as trustees for the children. The Government acts or should act as a trustee of the people. The representatives of the people in a democracy are the trustees of those who have chosen them as members of a legislature. . . The trustee, by the very term used, means that he is not the owner. The owner is one whose interest he is called upon to protect.' So, this is Gandhiji's trusteeship and 'Talking to the textile mill labourers in Ahmeda-

bad, Gandhiji told them that they were the real masters of the mills. Their labour was more precious than the wealth of the capitalists. But what if the trustee does not act in the interest of the real owner? In civil life the ward has the remedy if the trustee violates his trust. Reference can be made to a court of law. If it is found that the trustee has not acted in the interest of the real owner, the court dismisses him and appoints another trustee. In the case of peasants and labourers this may not be possible unless the Government is so constituted that it works for the good of the common man. Gandhi, therefore, advised the labourers and the Kisans to offer Satyagraha to assert their rights.'

In Gandhiji's own words, as already quoted from his autobiography, during the textile workers' strike the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners themselves explained their relationship with the labourers as those of parents and children and so they let Gandhiji know that they were not prepared to brook the interference of a third party. Gandhiji's views on labour-owner relationship thus fully coincided with those of the owners themselves. 'Believing as he did in non-violence, he was of course against the physical liquidation of the capitalists and Zamindars. Yet their exploitation had to end. This he believed could be done if the landlords and the capitalists acted as trustees of the poor.'⁵¹ It is therefore, no conjecture, but facts confirm that whatever he might have desired or believed, Gandhiji's doctrine of trusteeship was in real sense a theorization of those very naive words of the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners. And this sophistry was trumpeted before the world as the novelty of Gandhian method for resolving labour-owner disputes. Desisting the workers and peasants from militant class struggle against the capitalists and landlords, promoting class peace and class collaboration and ultimately to perpetuate the existing society based on capitalist and feudal exploitation—these were what this novelty exactly meant. The ingenuity of Gandhian ideology thus lay in the innovation of such an absolutely retrograde theory.

Ahmedabad Labour Association was organized on the basis of this ideal. The system of the collection of union subscription, through the employers, by deduction from the wages; recognizing eligibility of even the employers to get elected as

representative of the workers and allowing even the mill-manager to contest Municipal election as workers' nominee, lent the Association the character of a fully company-patronized union. And Gandhiji dreamt of controlling all the trade unions of the country on this cherished model!

When the All India Trade Union Congress came into being, Gandhiji made all endeavours to keep this Association totally aloof from that all-India body. Confidently forecasting Gandhiji said,⁵² 'A time will come, when it will be possible for the Trade Union Congress to accept the Ahmedabad method. But I am in no hurry. It will come in its own time'.

Referring to Gandhiji's attitude towards bigger combination, Mr. S. A. Dange writes,⁵³ 'He helped to build the Majoor Mahajan. But he did not want them to join the AITUC. He had not wanted the AITUC as such as it would inevitably lead the workers into politics and class conflict. At the very moment he was calling the whole country on hartals, he did not want the workers to go on strike. But the workers did go on strike, much to his displeasure.'

Gandhiji did not believe in class analysis. To him, neither the workers, nor the employers formed any separate class. He considered the modern industrial society not as a progress over the earlier ones but as an evil and so he wished destruction of this society and yearned for restoration of something like that of ancient Indian society based on handicrafts. He could not differentiate between the evil aspects of the capitalist ownership and the boon of industrial advance. Rather, he discovered all evils within the machine itself. 'Hence he wanted restoration of the ancient Hindu Varna system but without its castes or untouchability.'⁵⁴ Analyzing this Gandhian concept of society and labour, Mr. S. A. Dange observed,⁵⁵ 'In such a conception, the working class was not a class but something akin to the Sudra varna. It was his duty to labour and it was the duty of the owning rich to feed him and treat him well. Both had mutual duties towards each other. Anyone, who failed to observe his part had to be blamed and pressure brought on him to correct himself.'

This reactionary ideology coming as it did from a national leader of Gandhiji's stature could not but adversely affect the militancy of working-class movement at least in some parts of

the country, if not of the whole. Worst affected were the Ahmedabad workers who bound by Gandhiji's spell, remained for long submerged in the quagmire of crass reformism and class harmony. As regards the growth of class consciousness of the Indian proletariat as a whole it was largely impaired by the influence of this ideology.

Other Trade Unions :

Despite these negative traits, Gandhian ideology or its concretized form, Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association could not hamstring the general course of development of working-class movement. Persistent strike actions and concomitant emergence of new trade unions in this period laid firm foundation of Indian Trade Union movement. Many of the trade unions of this period, of course, sprouted out of immediate necessity and were short-lived, yet many genuine others appeared with a prospect of permanence and steadily developed overcoming disadvantageous circumstances. The ephemeral or spurious unions were in many cases stimulated by ambitious career seekers, who tried to utilize the trade unions as a suitable platform to gain leadership in public life and secure nomination by the government to the legislative bodies, various commissions and committees and even to the International Labour Conferences in Europe.

But on the whole, 'This period was one of growth and consolidation', observed the Royal Commission on Labour in India. 'The strengthening of individual unions was accompanied by an increasing cohesion in the movement as a whole,' they further observed.⁵⁶

The Indian working class thus started rapidly becoming conscious of concerted action and their untiring efforts bore fruits and it is estimated that in 1920 there existed 125 unions with a total membership of 250,000.⁵⁷ Some of the prominent unions, as noted below with their years of foundation, will give an indication of the all-pervasive character of organizational activity during this period.

1. The Press Employees' Association, Calcutta, 1919.
2. The Calcutta Tramway Employees' Association, 1919.
3. N. W. Railway Union, 1919.
4. G. I. P. Railway Union, 1919.
5. Mechanical Workers' Union, 1919.

6. Punjab Press Association, 1919.
7. Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway Union, Madras, 1919.
8. Jamshedpur Labour Association, 1920.
9. Ahmedabad Workers' Union, 1920.
10. Indian Colliery Employees' Association, 1920.
11. B. N. Railway Indian Labour Union, Kharagpur, Bengal, 1920.
12. All-India Postal & R.M.S. Union, 1920.
13. The Imperial Bank Indian Staff Association, 1920.
14. The Burma Labour Association, 1920.
15. Howrah Labour Union, 1920.
16. The Oriya Labour Union, 1920.
17. B. N. W. Railwaymen's Association, 1920.
18. B. B. & C. I. Railway Employees' Union, 1920.
19. E. B. Railway Indian Employees' Association, 1920.
20. Bombay Port Trust Employees' Union, 1920.
21. Bengal Mariners' Union, 1920.
22. The Drivers', Oilman and Firemen's Union, Throstle Union, the Weavers' Union, Ahmedabad, 1920.
23. Indian Seamen's Union, Calcutta, 1920.
24. Bengal Central Labour Federation, Calcutta, 1920.
25. Port Trust Employees' Association, Calcutta, 1920.
26. Provincial Railway Mail Service & Postal Association, Calcutta, 1920.
27. Inland Steamer & Flat Employees' Union, Calcutta, 1920.
28. Calcutta Motor Drivers' Association, Calcutta, 1920.
29. Postal Peons' Association, Calcutta, 1920.
30. Bengal Ministerial Officers' Association, Calcutta, 1920.

So began the phase of organized trade union movement in India.

Attitude of the Government towards the Trade Unions :

This wave of trade union activity alongside the widespread and intensive political agitations in India despite dangling Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 caused deep concern to the imperialist government. The imperialists were quick to realize that the reinforced labour activity added to the prevailing political unrest in India would complicate the situation further.

Alarmed at the great awakening of European labour as a sequel to Russian Revolution, the imperialist government noticed a danger signal in the growing trade union activity of the Indian labour and considered this as nothing less than a sedition. So anxiously motivated to curb this rising tide, the imperialist government thought of two devices—the first of sup-

pression and the second of hoodwinking in the name of official intervention.

Thus side by side with repressive measures like spying into the activities of the trade union workers, imprisoning them and subjecting them to innumerable other police harassments, the government was also thinking in terms of legislating labour laws in the pattern of English Industrial Court. Despite this feeling of the necessity of a conciliatory approach, official intervention in labour disputes however, as a general rule, went in favour of the employers. The government showed its eagerness more in helping the owners than in solving the disputes.

The Madras Government instituted a Labour Advisory Board which favoured appointment of Courts of Enquiry for investigating into labour-owner disputes. The Courts of Enquiry though succeeded in settling some labour disputes in Madras Presidency, soon this system became inoperative.

In Bengal several special investigations were instituted by the government during 1921. The Bengal Industrial Disputes Enquiry Committee of that year opined that many of the labour disputes could have been settled before turning serious had there been a favourable attitude for negotiation on the part of both labour and owner.⁵⁸ This committee recommended formation of Works Committees in the industries in the pattern of Whitley Committees of Great Britain. In the public utility industries, it recommended institution of Conciliation Boards. But none of these recommendations were implemented and the workers were left where they were.

A similar committee was instituted in Bombay also in November 1921. To obviate labour disputes, this committee recommended wage-revision, free growth of trade unionism and recognition of the unions by the employers. Simultaneously it recommended introduction of Works Committee, different labour welfare measures and improved housing.⁵⁹ It also favoured enactment of laws following the pattern of British Industrial Court Act. As a machinery of solving labour disputes, the committee preferred the use of a Court of Enquiry to be followed according to necessity by a Conciliation Board. The Government of Bombay introduced a Bill on this subject, but was subsequently abandoned at the direction of the Government of India.

It is to be noted that both the committees of Bengal and Bombay recommended Works Committee actually as a substitute for trade unions. It was natural therefore that this recommendation was taken objection to by the trade unions as an undemocratic and rival institution.

In reality, the trade union movement in India during the period, was not so powerful as to force the imperialist government to introduce, in order to protect the interest of Indian labour, even a fraction of those labour welfare measures and legislations, which the English working-class movement compelled the same government to introduce in England. Absolute unconcern on the part of the leaders of the national movement in this respect was also largely responsible for this indifferent attitude of the government. The trade union leaders, however, always felt the necessity of official intervention against the persistent refusal of the employers in settling workers' legitimate grievances. But in a colonial administration like India, it was customary for the government to consider labour movement as simply a law and order problem and so official intervention ironically meant pitting the bureaucracy and the armed forces against the working-class movement and smashing it.

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FOUNDATION OF THE ALL INDIA TRADE UNION CONGRESS 1920

The Historical Moment :

THE All India Trade Union Congress, the first organization of the Indian working class at national level, was born in the background of a sweeping mass and working-class struggle in the period following the war and especially the October Socialist Revolution.

Through the war, the Indian national bourgeoisie emerged a stronger force than before both economically and politically. And, the end of the war, success of the October Revolution and appearance of the first general crisis of capitalism added new strength and inspiration to the anti-imperialist struggle of India. This situation opened up new hopes and possibilities for India's national liberation. The Indian working class too did not fail to occupy its own place in the panoramic struggle that was developing to attain this objective. The All India Trade Union Congress thus emerged in 1920 as a united platform of the Indian proletariat to conduct their struggle against imperialist domination and the rule of capital.

Mr. Bal Gangadhar Tilak who was already connected with the workers of Bombay attained a much wider outlook during his stay in England. He became acquainted with the British Trade Union Congress and the Labour Party and observed the activities of different trade unions. Impressed by the labour movement of Britain, he felt the necessity of building up similar organization and movement in India. His activities emanating from this new feeling and his popularity among the workers of Bombay played a conducive role in laying the foundation of the All India Trade Union Congress.

The Treaty of Versailles could not altogether ignore, but had to give cognizance to the tide of working-class movement

that followed the war, especially in Europe. The trade unions acquired membership of unprecedented heights and the sweep of the movement appeared as a social and political factor to be reckoned with. So recognizing the importance of trade unions in the social and political life of the member-States, the International Labour Organization was set up in 1919 as a part of the League of Nations. The ILO was a tripartite body having representatives from the member-nations who met to discuss labour problems and worked for legislation for social reforms for labour. The ILO Charter was based on the principles of humanity and social justice. It could discuss and recommend social reforms for Labour but had no executive authority to see to its implementation by the member-States. In the case of countries like India where implementation of existing legislations was a big problem, the question of ratifying ILO conventions and applying those in favour of the workers was a distant cry. But the reformist labour leaders of that period were greatly intent upon utilizing this international forum as much to publicize the plight of the workers as to strengthen their own position. With the motive of presenting an exaggerated view of India's industrialization under colonial rule, the British Government introduced India as one of the founder States of ILO and they nominated Mr. B. P. Wadia to represent Indian labour in the first conference of this organization.

In 1920 Mr. N. M. Joshi was nominated by the Government of India to represent India in Washington Conference of ILO and Mr. Tilak was nominated as his adviser. Despite Mr. Joshi's nomination, it appears from the secret report of the government that the Bombay workers chose Mr. Tilak as their representative for Washington Labour Conference. The secret report says,¹ 'On the 29th November 1919, an open air meeting attended by about 10,000 was convened behind the Elphinstone Mills by the leaders of the labouring classes for the purpose of presenting an address to Tilak, their chosen representative for the Washington Labour Congress, on his return from England.' Tilak did not attend Washington Conference and in that meeting he explained the reason as 'having been elected by the labourers as their representative, he declined to go as an assistant to the man selected by government.'²

These reports point out a serious difference of opinion that

cropped up among the labour leaders of that period on the question of representation in the ILO. Precisely, it was a question of selecting the real representative of Indian labour and also the manner of its selection. So Mr. Tilak's refusal to join Washington Conference as an assistant to Mr. Joshi actually questioned the very propriety of the latter's nomination.

Article 389 of the Treaty of Versailles, in terms of which ILO was constituted, enjoins upon the members to 'undertake to nominate non-government delegates and advisers chosen in agreement with the industrial organization, if such organizations exist which are most representative of employers or work people as the case may be in their respective countries.' Drawing government's attention to the provisions of this article, the workers of Bombay in a meeting held on 7 July 1920 at Parel adopted the following resolution:³

That the meeting of the organized workers of Bombay and the delegates present protests against unconstitutional nomination by the Government of India of a representative of the workers of India to the International Labour Conference and the Commission of Inquiry in direct contravention of articles 389 and 412 of the League of Nations covenant and asserts the distinct right of the workers to elect their own representatives and advisers. In pursuance of the right given to the workers this meeting urges the government to withdraw the nomination of Mr. N. M. Joshi and send in his stead a duly elected representative of the organized workers of India.

That this meeting resolves to hold an All-India Trade Union Congress in Bombay and elects Lala Lajpat Rai as the first President.

'No sooner was this done than the work of organizing the first session of the Congress was taken in hand earnestly'—wrote Dewan Chaman Lall. He further wrote, 'The date was fixed 22nd August. Lala Lajpat Rai was chosen as President. Messrs. Baptista, Andrews, Brelvi, Lokamanya Tilak and Mrs. Besant were chosen Vice-Presidents.'⁴

This incident relating to the representation in the ILO is explained by certain quarters as the root cause of foundation of All India Trade Union Congress. But it is definitely an erroneous way of looking into the whole affair. The question of representation in the ILO might have served as an immediate impulse for its foundation, but deeper under the surface lay the historical necessity that gave birth to this first central organization of the Indian working class. The genesis of this organiza-

tion is to be traced in the course of political and economic struggles of India during those years.

From a different angle, some also try to explain that the period 1905-8 was perhaps better suited for birth of this central class organization than the year 1920, as the former was the period which found the Indian workers in the thick of a sharp political struggle on the occasion of Mr. Tilak's conviction.

The background of political struggle during 1905-8 is admitted, but the unprecedented dimension of class struggle waged by the Indian working class in the national and international set-up of the post-war period against imperialism and capitalist exploitation bore more significance from the point of view of the workers' class political consciousness and so it can be well asserted that the birth of the central class organization of the Indian proletariat was neither belated nor ill-timed, rather it was born at the right moment in the befitting background of a national-political awakening and world-shaking events.

Social Base and

Political Ideology of the Founders :

Many of the founders of this central organization of the working class and many who led it subsequently were leaders of the national movement. Politically, leadership of the national movement was in the hands of the reformist bourgeoisie. More militant in view-point, Mr. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was one of the foremost leaders of Indian national movement of that time. Connected though he was with the working class, he could not view the workers' problems from any class sense, rather an abstract idea of social justice and religious humanitarianism impelled him to the suffering workers.

The speech he delivered in the meeting of the Bombay workers on 29 November 1919, on his return from England was a classic manifestation of his outlook on labour problems. Following is the substance of what he told in the meeting:⁵

'Everyone in this country could be described as a majur or labour. In this respect the Hindu and Christian religions differed, the latter regarding work as a curse; the former as a blessing, and man's greatest desire, according to the poet Tukaram, to be born and born again to do the work ordained by God. It is wrong, therefore, to distinguish between man as labourers and masters.

The idea originated in England and has been brought to India, but must not be allowed to spread. The English had begun to realize that it was wrong. . . .

The speaker then compared wages in India and England. The labourer in India, who used to get 2 annas a day, now owing to the war, gets 12 annas, in English money, 1 shilling; while in England an ordinary constable draws Rs. 150 a month and tramway conductor £4 a week. His audience could imagine the luxury they lived in. He should warn them, however, that wealth was a comparative term and depended on the buying capacity of the money. In England everyone was much poorer than they had been before the war. The conclusion he wished to draw was that it was preferable to increase the happiness of the labour than his wages; that a man's pay must be proportionate to his expenses. . . .

Proceeding, he said he had brought them a message from the English Labouring classes. It was that they should form Trade Unions; and the stronger these were, the sooner they would obtain their rights. They must not be deterred by opposition in this respect.'

It is highly noteworthy that Mr. Tilak delivered this speech only a few months before the workers' meeting on 7 July 1920 wherein it was resolved to hold All India Trade Union Congress. It is also noteworthy that Mr. Tilak gave vent to such a mixed-up thinking on labour just when he was fresh with his personal experiences of English labour movement. Such a way of looking at labour was not however peculiar to Mr. Tilak alone, it was symbolical, with a little degree of variance, of what was in mind of those national leaders who were connected with the labour.

Lala Lajpat Rai presided over the inaugural session of the AITUC. His presidential address in that session revealed, however, a clearer outlook on labour.

Among other Congress leaders, the two most eminent, Mr. Motilal Nehru and Mr. Vithalbhair Patel graced the Conference with their presence.

Besides the Congress leaders, many other notable personalities were present in the conference. Among them were Mr. B. P. Wadia of Madras Labour Union, Mrs. Annie Besant of Theosophical Society, Rev. C. F. Andrews, a Christian missionary, Mr. B. G. Horniman and Syed Abdulla Brelvi of the Bombay Chronicle and Mr. K. F. Nariman, a young radical Parsee.

Among the advanced women personalities who were present in the Conference, the names of Miss Nagutai Joshi, a doctor

and Mrs. Abantikabai Gokhale, a social worker may be specially mentioned. Along with Mr. Jinnah, Mrs. Jinnah was also present.

The richer men also, connected with business and industry, did not altogether stay away. Among them present were Messrs. Lallubhai Samaldas, Lalji Narainji, Hansraj P. Thakersey and Lallubhai D. Jhaveri. A few more rich men who had some slender connection with the then political movement of the country were also in attendance. Laxmidas Ranji was one of them who was later elected treasurer of the AITUC. Another rich man, Malvi Govindji, a participant in the conference, was in company with Mr. Tilak and addressed workers' meeting in the Parel area of Bombay. There was Mr. Subhani, a mill-owner sympathetic to anti-imperialist movement. The proceedings of the conference mention Mian Muhammad Haji Jan Muhammad Chhotani, a big timber merchant and saw-mill owner as having donated Rs. 500 to the AITUC session.⁶

The Reception Committee Chairman was Mr. Joseph Baptista, a Barrister and a well-to-do man. He was influenced by the ideology of Independent Labour Party of Great Britain and was desirous of establishing fabian socialism in India. There was Dewan Chaman Lall who was involved in labour movement and played an important part in the formation of AITUC. During the War, he took part in the session of Workers' Welfare League of India in England. In 1920 he lent active support to the strike of the North-Western Railway workers.

Noticeably, representatives from various walks of Indian social and political life, the front-rankers of Congress leadership, labour leaders, a section of the bourgeois social-workers and even a section of the industrial rich gathered together in the inaugural session of the AITUC and in their own way tried to express their sympathy for the workers' cause. But the most remarkable fact was the absence of Gandhiji who did not even send a message to the conference. Commenting upon this, Mr. S. A. Dange wrote,⁷ "Though Tilak was the moving spirit of the AITUC formation in its first phase before his death, Mahatma Gandhi had also been consulted. *He did not approve of the idea.* And when the AITUC session was held, he refused to attend or send a message. He had a principle and a tactical line on this question which ruled out anything like a central

organization of the working class and its trade unions.' This role of Gandhiji was, however, quite befitting to his political ideology. He foresighted the dangerous consequences of the working class being organized !

Mr. Bal Gangadhar Tilak who was popular among the workers and urged them to organize into trade unions could not live to see the birth of this organization. His expiry on 1 August 1920 marked the conference with a sad undertone.

The dais of the conference was thus adorned by a galaxy of millionaires along with the leaders of the Congress and a host of other persons most of whom had no connection with the labour at all. Only a few were there who were directly interested in and connected with the workers' movement. But the workers who were stirred into many a class-action during this period and were passing through a phase of political turbulence, joined this conference in large number.

By the workers stood the politically advanced students of Bombay, prominent among whom were Mr. S. A. Dange and Mr. R. S. Nimbkar. These students shouldered various responsibilities including that of volunteer service for success of the conference.

The founding session of AITUC was held in a period when beginning of the communist movement and the birth of a political party of the Indian working class were yet to take place. The entire leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle was vested with the national bourgeoisie. But at the same time, world political changes and the establishment of the first Socialist State and its ideal had also their radicalizing impact upon the Indian workers. When the All India Trade Union Congress was founded in such a cross-current of events, the bourgeois leadership of the anti-imperialist movement of India was put at the helm of this workers' organization also and thus historically Indian working class joined hands with the national bourgeoisie in a united platform for struggle.

In consequence, the persistent weakness and wavering of the national leadership attributable to its class origin directly affected the thinking and activities of AITUC. But in the historical course of attainment of political maturity by the working class, beginning of the communist movement, formation of the Communist Party of India, intensification of class struggle and

many a change in the national and international political arena, this organization had to advance through a process of manifold ideological conflicts and a number of splits. In course of these contradictions and splits the reformist and compromising section of the leadership left AITUC and gave birth to a set of organizations, all vying with each other for crass bourgeois-reformism. This process continued up to 1947 after which greater and more significant changes took place in the organization of AITUC and labour movement in general. The following chapters of this volume will deal with that part of history, full of exciting events and sharp conflicts.

The Inaugural Session :

22 August 1920 was originally fixed to be the date for commencing the first session of the All India Trade Union Congress. Meanwhile passing away of Mr. Tilak and other exigencies ultimately postponed the session to 31 October to 2 November 1920.

In the preliminary note on the proceedings of the Conference, Dewan Chaman Lall wrote:⁸

‘The Congress which opened at Empire Theatre in Bombay in October was a stupendous success and went beyond our wildest expectations. Eight hundred and one delegates from all parts of India attended this session. Swami Viswananda with another delegate attended on behalf of the Coalminers of Bihar and Bengal. Sixty Unions in all were definitely affiliated and 42 unions expressed their sympathy with and gave their support to the Trade Union Congress, but owing to one reason or another they were not able to send their delegates. From the lists attached it will be seen that workers from all parts of India were represented at the Congress. The delegates of the miners came as representatives of two lakhs of workers. It will be seen that together with the miners and the sympathising unions the Trade Union Congress represents no less than 500,000 workers.’

The following report is recorded regarding inauguration of the Conference:⁹

TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD

The first Trade Union Congress of India opened its sessions at the Empire Theatre, Bombay, on Sunday, 31 October, 1920,

amid scenes of great enthusiasm. The theatre was crowded to its utmost capacity by delegates and visitors. The delegates who came from different parts of the country were present in large numbers representing practically all branches of labour in India. The attendance of members of the different trade unions in Bombay was of course the largest but representatives of labour in other parts of the country were also present in good numbers. And the members of the general public also attended in large number, the space reserved for visitors being fully occupied. The platform was equally crowded with members of the Reception Committee and other well-known citizens.

Lala Lajpat Rai, President of the Congress, received a tremendous ovation on arrival and Colonel J. C. Wedgewood and Mr. J. Baptista were also cordially received by the assembly. . . .

The proceedings commenced with the singing of labour songs, after which Mr. Joseph Baptista, Chairman of the Reception Committee, made a speech welcoming the delegates. He was given a most enthusiastic reception on rising to address the assembly, and his speech evoked repeated applause.

Mr. Baptista in his address, pointed out the slave-like condition of the Indian workers. In a capitalist society, where wage-slavery is the rule, the workers do not possess anything but their labour-power which they are forced to sell to the capitalists. And the capitalists swell their profits on maximum exploitation of that labour-power. Mr. Baptista could not, of course, get into this fundamental truth of social science in the way explained by Marx, but experience led him at least to realize that the source of the capitalists' wealth was the exploitation of the workers' labour-power. While addressing he said,¹⁰ 'The *via dolorosa* for the labourer has been slavery, serfdom, or indentures or statutes of labour, combination laws and similar beds of roses. The emancipation of labour from this oppressive system is not yet fully attained as our own people are experiencing in some parts of the world Christian governments. But even where there are no indenture conditions or combination laws, labour is dominated by capital. Capitalists have ceased to buy slaves, but they still buy labour and pay for it according to the infernal law of demand and supply. This idea of buying is the root of the evil.' But it was not possible for him to realize that abolition of the capitalist system itself can only put an end to this exploitation. So he said,¹¹ 'Till it is eradicated and supplanted by the higher idea of partnership the well-being of the workers will never be secured. They are partners and co-

workers and not buyers and sellers of labour.' That was how he ultimately confused the issue.

Lala Lajpat Rai, of his own rights, was elected president of the Conference. Not his eminence as a leader of Congress only, but his firm role in national movement, his sympathetic attitude towards the workers and other oppressed people and his general popularity entitled him to this rare honour of being the president of this first national-level conference of the Indian workers. Proposed by Mr. B. P. Wadia and seconded by Messrs. D. Chaman Lall, N. M. Joshi and a worker-delegate he took to the chair in the midst of tremendous ovation.

The beginning of his presidential address itself was unique when he said: ¹² 'It is a unique occasion, the first of its kind even in the history of this ancient country of ours. In her long history extending over thousands of years, India has surely seen many a great gathering in which parts of this vast subcontinent and all classes of its population were represented, gatherings at which were discussed and settled important and nice questions of religion, philosophy, grammar, law and politics, gatherings in which foreign scholars and foreign ambassadors and foreign diplomats took part. But history records no instance of an assemblage that was convened solely to consider the interests and welfare of workers not of this city or that, not of this province or that, but of Bharatvarsha as a whole.

'Even under British rule we have had all-India gatherings of various kinds, political, religious, social, literary, scientific, etc. etc., but never an all-India meeting of the workers of the country or one where people assembled to consider the interests and the present and future welfare of the workers as such. This by itself should show, if there was nothing else to remind us of the fact, that the India of today is very different from the India of ancient and medieval times, nay even from the India of yesterday. We are living in an age quite different from anything that the world has seen or known before. That being so, the problems that face and the questions that confront us are, from the very nature of things, of a different kind from those that confronted our immediate and remote ancestors. This fact, whether we like it or not, has to be recognized.'

The real import of the new epoch ushered in by the October Revolution and the birth of the first workers' State of

the world did not, however, find any reflection in Lalaji's speech, but he was able to realize the process of disappearance of the old epoch and its substitution by a new in the midst of the world-wide labour awakening and organizational consolidation of the Indian workers. That the organized working class was the real antidote to this ruinous capitalism, was also to a great extent realized by him. Thus in his speech he said,¹³ 'Militarism and imperialism are the twin children of capitalism; they are one in three and three in one. Their shadow, their fruit and their bark, all are poisonous. It is only lately that an antidote has been discovered and that antidote is organized labour.'

The realization that the combination of the working class against capitalism was not peculiar to any particular country and that the working class ought to be organized internationally to combat world capitalist system was also conspicuous in his speech. He welcomed international consolidation of the workers. He said,¹⁴ 'The workers of Europe and America have now discovered that the cause of the workers is one and the same all the world over, and that there can be no salvation for them unless and until the workers of Asia were organized, and internationally affiliated. Labour in Europe threatens to turn the tables against their masters, the employers, and they recognize that the success of their movement demands a close association of European workers with the workers of Asia.'

In striking contrast to the attitude of the present ruling classes of India towards labour, this high-ranking leader of Congress of that time emphatically said,¹⁵ 'If however Indian capital wants to ignore the needs of labour and can think only of its huge profits, it should expect no response from labour and no sympathy from the general public. If labour must remain half-starved, ill-clothed, badly housed, and destitute of education, it can possibly have no interest in the development of Indian industries and all appeals in the name of patriotism must fail.'

Though not in a Marxian way, he also realized the importance of workers' class-consciousness and attainment of political right and he saw in the dictatorship of the Russian proletariat the highest manifestation of the workers' political power. So he added,¹⁶ 'While it is true that the interests of labour are the

same all the world over, it is equally true that the power of labour in each country is limited by local and national circumstances. Labour in Europe is in a position to dictate. European workmen have found out that to depend for the enforcement of their right and the amelioration of their condition on the political action of persons who owe their legislative power and position to the vote of men of property is absurd and unnatural. In order to protect the interests of himself and his class, the workmen must have a vote and he must give it to a man of his class or to a man pledged to his interests. So every workman in Europe is a political unit. Over and above this, European labour has found another weapon in direct action. On the top comes the Russian worker, who aims to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.'

Not forgetful of the consequences of the workers' efforts at unity and international connection, he warned that the government¹⁷ 'will not even hesitate to use all forces of militarism at their command to crush our efforts towards united action and to keep us disunited, unorganized and out of touch with world affairs' and he cited the instances of governmental high-handedness in dealing with several strike-actions of the workers and prohibiting the importation of *Soviet Russia* and the *Daily Herald* of London. What is most striking that as early as in 1920 and within three years of the birth of Soviet Russia he could not fail to discern the slanderous lies underlying the imperialist propaganda against this first Socialist State. Though hazily, he understood also the relativity of truth in a class-divided society and that it was of two kinds—one in the eyes of the capitalists and the other in the eyes of the working class. Thus castigatingly he said,¹⁸ 'while the Anglo-Indian press is engaged in disseminating palpable lies about Soviet Russia, the Government of India steps in to prevent the people of India from knowing the other side of the story. Truth in Europe is of two kinds: (a) capitalistic and governmental truth represented by men like Mr. Winston Churchill and papers like the *London Times* and the *Morning Post* and (b) socialistic and labour truth represented by labour organs of the type of *Justice*, *Daily Herald* and *Soviet Russia*.' Then unhesitatingly he declared,¹⁹ 'The action of the Government of India in preventing access to the people of India to the socialistic and labour thought of the world is the least

justifiable of all its repressive actions and should be unreservedly condemned (*cheers*).’

Simultaneous with asserting the necessity of the Indian workers getting acquainted with socialist thoughts and working-class ideology, he warned, however, against premature application of Western and Russian standard of labour in India of that day. He said,²⁰ ‘There is no one in India who believes that the European and Russian standards of labour can be applied to the India of today. If there were any I would remind him or them of the message of Lenin to Belakun, wherein the former warned the latter against the danger of applying Russian standard to Hungary prematurely. For the present our greatest need in this country is to organize, agitate and educate. We must organize our worker, make them class conscious and educate them in the ways and interests of commonweal.’

Despite so much of his consciousness against capitalist and imperialist exploitation, his concern for working-class interests and his respectful attitude towards proletarian dictatorship in Russia, Lala Lajpat Rai dismally failed to call upon the workers for fight for complete independence of India, and what is more, even the mere demand for freedom was painfully missing in his long exhortive speech. How he concluded was in fundamental contradiction to what he said before. Defining the attitude towards the government he concluded²¹ ‘In this minute I want to explain our attitude towards government. It is neither one of support nor that of opposition.’

This tremendous self-contradiction was not of Lalaji alone, it was of the National Congress as a whole. This basic weakness was entirely due to the pusillanimity of Congress towards the idea of *Swaraj* itself. The Calcutta special session of Congress held in September 1920 under the presidentship of Lala Lajpat Rai resolved to conduct ‘non-violent non-co-operation’ of Gandhi-Motilal Nehru, but in regard to the demand of *Swaraj* Congress remained yet undecided. The extremely vague idea of and a very narrow desire for colonial self-government within the empire rendered the Congress leadership politically sluggish and so far from putting an unequivocal demand for *Swaraj*, the Amritsar Congress preceding Calcutta special session could not reach any unanimity even on the constitutional reforms offered by the Montagu-Chelmsford Report. While Mr. Tilak and his

associates opposed the reforms, Gandhiji aided by Mrs. Annie Besant wanted its full acceptance although finally a compromise formula came to their succour. So even in this respect the stand of the Congress was quite hesitant.

The pitiable conclusion of the speech of Lala Lajpat Rai in the AITUC session, which vindicated an otherwise high degree of consciousness and a broad outlook, was the crude manifestation of this unfathomed weakness of the Congress leadership as well as of a general condition of political perplexity which this frailty generated. Not only the presidential speech, the speeches of other leaders too avoided mentioning the demand for *Swaraj* and in conformity with this outlook of the founding fathers, it was most unfortunate that this first conference of the Indian workers did not adopt any resolution demanding *Swaraj*.

The presidential speech having concluded, Dewan Chaman Lall read out the congratulatory letters and telegraphic messages received from various labour organizations of Great Britain. Mr. George Lansbury, editor of the *Daily Herald* sent a message expressing sympathy with the object of the Congress. Similar messages were received from the Transport Workers' Federation, the Irish Trades Union Congress, representing 300,000 workers, the Irish Women Workers' Union and other labour unions of Great Britain and Ireland. Mr. Chaman Lall said these messages had come through the Workers' Welfare League for India and as a result of the activities of Mr. Saklatvala.

Col. Wedgwood attended the conference as a fraternal delegate from the British Labour Party. The conference gave him a resounding ovation which he reciprocated by expression, in his own way, of his sympathy with the Indian workers.

After hearing the congratulatory messages, the Congress adopted a resolution extending fraternal greetings to British Trade Union Congress and to the Irish Trades Union Congress.

The conference discussed various problems of the workers. The International Labour Conference held in Washington recommended an eight-hour day for all nations except India. The Congress intended to refer the question to the Standing Committee for consideration. While discussing the question of unemployment the conference noted that the International Labour Conference had recommended to respective governments in Europe and such other countries to make provision for the un-

employed, but no such recommendation was made to the Government of India. And while minimum age for child labour was recommended to be twelve for India, for other countries it was fixed at fourteen.

The Congress deplored this discriminatory treatment towards the Indian labour in relation to the labour in the Western countries and decided to refer these issues for consideration of the Standing Committee which was entrusted to prepare an exhaustive memorandum on the grievances of Indian labour with special reference to (1) disabilities arising out of and consequent upon strikes, (2) establishment and confiscation of gratuity and provident fund and other benefits, (3) employment of military, armed police, boy-scouts and pathan hooligans during strike, (4) corporal punishment meted out by employers, (5) condition of workers in coalmines and (6) forfeiture of wages.²²

Against repression on the overseas Indian labourers the Congress adopted a resolution which recorded,²³ 'protests against the brutal treatment meted out to Indian workers, men and women, in Fiji and proposes that full independent inquiry be made and proper facilities afforded to those who wish to return to their motherland'. Another resolution recorded emphatic 'protests against the prevalent conditions of labour in Indian coal-fields' and called upon 'the government and coal owners to take immediate steps to remove such horrible conditions.'²⁴

At the time of the Congress, Indian labour was without vote. Demanding voting right for the workers a resolution was adopted stating that the Congress was 'of opinion that law should be changed as to recognize the right of labour to have a special representation by election on the legislative councils of the country on the same principles that the different Chambers of Commerce and Millowners' and Planters' Associations have'.²⁵

In separate resolutions the Congress demanded certain amenities for the women workers. Problems arising out of disciplinary and punitive measures taken against the labourers also came up for discussion in the Congress.

The resolution on representation to International Labour Conference was moved by Mr. L. R. Tairsee. The resolution stated,²⁶ "That this Congress nominates the following gentlemen to represent Indian labour on the International Labour Conference to be held next year at Geneva under the Convention of the

League of Nations: (1) Representatives' Delegate, Lala Lajpat Rai, President, Trade Union Congress, (2) Advisers, Mr. B. P. Wadia and Mr. D. Chaman Lall, and empowers the President to add names of advisers to represent agricultural interests, etc. Further, this Congress nominates Mr. N. M. Joshi for the panel of the Commission of Inquiry instituted under the League's covenant.'

The Congress by another resolution recorded its deep and grateful appreciation of the valuable services rendered by Mr. B. G. Horniman to the cause of labour and condemned the unjust and arbitrary restraint imposed upon his freedom and called for immediate removal of the same.²⁷

The Congress adopted another resolution placing on record,²⁸ 'its grateful acknowledgement of the work done by the Indian Workers' Welfare League of London and by Mr. Shapurji Saklatvala on behalf of the workers of India and hereby authorises the Standing Committee to get into communication with the League with a view to closer co-operation for the representation in England of the interests of Indian workers.'

By another resolution the Congress recorded²⁹ 'emphatic protest against the action of the government in proscribing the *Daily Herald* of London.'

After the conclusion of the Congress, a deputation headed by Mr. Baptista waited upon the Governor of Bombay and submitted a memorandum to him.

Election of Office-Bearers and Standing Committee :

The Congress elected a Standing Committee for conducting activities of the AITUC for the following year. Lala Lajpat Rai and Mr. Joseph Baptista were respectively elected president and vice-president of AITUC. The first meeting of this Standing Committee was held on 2 November 1920 and the second meeting was held on 5 April 1921. The second meeting elected Dewan Chaman Lall as the first general secretary of AITUC and his monthly salary was fixed at Rs. 500.

The list of the members of the Standing Committee is quite long. But in view of the special historical significance attached to the names of these promoters and sympathizers of the early Indian Labour movement, the list though long is reproduced hereafter:³⁰

NAMES OF MEMBERS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE

Lala Lajpat Rai	Mr. A. V. Paranjpe
Mr. Joseph Baptista	Mr. Shankar Nachrekar
Mr. D. Chaman Lall	Mr. J. T. Gokhale
Mr. M. D. Dalvi	Mr. C. M. Pareira
Mr. L. R. Tairsee	Mr. N. J. Rawal
Mr. D. D. Sathye	Mr. Sitaram Shivaji
Mr. N. D. Sawarkar	Mr. S. Satyamurthi
Mr. M. B. Velkar	Mr. Krishnaram Keshavram
Seth Mavji Govindji	Bhatta
Mr. F. J. Ginwala	Mr. C. V. Sawant
Mr. L. G. Khare	Mr. Trimbaek Sitaram Sawant
Mr. S. A. Brelvi	Mr. Tej Singh Bhar
Mr. N. M. Joshi	Mr. Bapu Ramchandra
Mr. Kanji Dwarkadas	Mr. M. R. Arzoo
Mr. E. L. Iyer	Mr. R. S. Herlekar
Mr. S. N. Halдар	Mr. B. K. Kane
Mr. Deep Narayan Singh	Mr. Amritlall Sharma
Mr. V. M. Pawar	Mr. N. L. Matkar
Mr. B. P. Wadia	Mr. Abdulla Rahman Kazi
Mr. Anantaram Vaikunthram	Mr. Tukaram Santaji
Lala Dunichand	Mr. J. B. Naik
Mr. J. B. Miller	Mrs. Deep Narayan Singh
Lala Ishwardas Sawhney	Mr. K. Santanam
Mr. M. A. Khan	Lala Jagannath
Mr. G. R. Sawhney	Mr. Sankar Ladoba
Mr. Kumar Swami Chetty	Mr. Pandurang Sabaji Masurkar
Mr. Vaman Anant Patel	Mr. A. B. Kolhatkar
Mr. D. C. Pandit	Miss Chattopadhyaya
Mr. V. Chakarai Chetty	Mr. J. H. Khanna
Mr. Mistry Karam Illahai	Mr. G. S. Kanthi
Mr. Subramanyam Nayckar	Mr. Madhavrao
Mr. Vinayak Shiroadkar	Mr. P. L. Maltekchand
Swami Viswananda	Mrs. Avantikabai Gokhale
Mr. R. K. Misra	Miss Reuben
Mr. Rajaram Gopal	Mr. M. B. Maniar
Mr. Govinda Tukaram	Mr. Jalil Khan
Mr. Shiv Nandan	Mrs. Gulabchand Deochand
Mr. G. K. Gadgil	Mr. G. A. Pradhan
Mr. Venkataram Rele	Mr. Nadkarni

(In addition to the above the following names were added at the meeting of the Standing Committee held on 30 July 1921—Messrs. Tendulkar, Bhukandas, Murari Lal, Alfanso, Dalvi.)

Very few among them had actually any connection with the workers' movement. The large majority were loosely attrac-

ted towards the new organization more or less on humanitarian principles, but in course of time that attraction too faded away.

The All India Trade Union Congress issued a manifesto to the workers. This first manifesto addressed to the Indian workers did not of course, contain any revolutionary call to the workers, but in consideration of the historical importance attached to it being the first of its kind, the full text of it is reproduced below :³¹

MANIFESTO TO THE WORKERS OF INDIA

‘Workers of India!

‘The time has come for you to assert your right as arbiters of your country’s destiny. You cannot stand aloof from the stream of national life. You cannot refuse to face the events that are making history today for India. You are the mass of the population. Every movement on the political chess-board, every step in the financial or economical arrangements of your country, affects you more than it affects any other class. You must become conscious of your responsibilities. You must understand your rights. You must prepare yourselves to realize your destiny.

‘Workers of India! Your lot is hard one. How will you better it? Look at the slaves of the Assam tea plantations, now become desperate. Their real daily wages are less than three annas a day prescribed under government acts. They are often victims of brutal treatment, working under the lash of unlimited hours, while some of these plantations pay 20 to 40 per cent dividends. They are death and starvation dividends and it is you, your wives, your children who are the innocent unoffending victims. We call upon you to realize the meaning of this exploitation and offer by special levies from the members of each union what help you can to Mr. C. F. Andrews who is fighting at Chandpur the battle of these semislaves.

‘Workers of India! The earth is your common heritage. It is not specially reserved for professional politicians or the Simla bureaucrats, or the millowning plutocrats. Your nation’s leaders ask for SWARAJ, you may not let them leave you out of the reckoning. Political freedom to you is of no worth without economic freedom. You cannot therefore afford to neglect the movement for national freedom. You are part and parcel of that

movement. You will neglect it only at the peril of your liberty.

‘Workers of India! There is nothing in the nature of your union membership to prevent you from joining the Indian National Congress. You will continue to suffer as your Assam comrades are suffering for upholding the cause of freedom. Your masters will go out of their way, as Sir William Vincent has done, to threaten those of your leaders who happen to be non-co-operators for an alleged attempt to sow disaffection amongst the workers. You have nothing to fear. It is not a crime to create a repugnance of brutal treatment, of conditions of semi-slavery and of the horrible exploitation of women and children. You know well enough that it is the influence of these very leaders which has kept the peace and affected a settlement in almost every big strike in India during the past twelve months in spite of every attempt of the employers. Your cause is the cause of humanity. It cannot suffer through misrepresentation.

‘Workers of India ! There is only one thing for you to do. You must realize your unity. You must solidify your organizations. Do not look for salvation to the Factory Act. The law cannot give you unity. The law cannot create in you the spirit of brotherhood. That must be your own work. Spoliation of the workers is the cry of the capitalists in field and factory. Let unity and brotherhood of man be your watchwords. Your salvation lies in the strength of your organizations. Cling fast to them. Cast all weakness from you and you will surely tread the path to power and freedom.

D. Chaman Lall

General Secretary

All India Trade Union Congress’

On a similar consideration, the list of unions affiliated or sympathetic to AITUC during its foundation is also given below: ³²

LIST OF AFFILIATED AND SYMPATHETIC UNIONS

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Full title of the Union</i>	<i>Strength of the Union</i>
1	Bombay Oil Workers’ Union, Bombay	... 1,761
2	Chaprasi Union, Bombay	... 27
3	Bombay Port Trust Railway Staff Union	... 760

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Full title of the Union</i>	<i>Strength of the Union</i>
4	GIP Railway Workshop Men's Union	... 3,700
5	Mechanical Engineers' Association, Amraoti	... 96
6	Employees' Association, Calcutta	... 2,505
7	Labour Association, Jamshedpur	... 4,000
8	Bombay Port Trust Railway Employees' Union	... 370
9	Handloom Weavers' Union, Bombay	... 249
10	Bombay Press Workers' Union	... 1,698
11	Indian Railwaymen's Union, Bhopal	... 1,600
12	GIP Railwaymen's Union, Kalyan	... 1,200
13	Dock Workers' Union, Bombay	... 1,800
14	Indian Seamen's Union, Bombay	... 12,056
15	Bombay United Textile Workers' Union	... 204
16	Bombay Textile Workers' Federation	... 82
17	Panel Labour Union, Bombay	... 1,500
18	Bombay Port Trust Workshop Union	... 783
19	Bombay Presidency Postmen's Union	... 850
20	Bombay Postal Packers' Union	... 350
21	Bombay Telegraphmen's Union	... 300
22	Labour Union, Akola	... 32
23	Valod Labour Union, Kaira	... 279
24	Millhands' Union, Sholapur	... 32
25	Mechanical and Pumping Workshop Union, Madras	... 81
26	Hotel Servants' Union, Bombay	... 68
27	Mistry and Khandasma Allied Union	... 32
28	Clerks' Union, Bombay	... 446
29	Madras Tramwaymen's Union	... 170
30	Bombay Tramwaymen's Union	... 2,300
31	Press Workers' Union, Karachi	... 128
32	Workmen's Union, Kirkee	... 420
33	National Workmen's Union, Bombay	... 40
34	Girni Kamgar Sangh	... 1,200
35	Indian Labour League	... 600
36	Factory Clerks' Union	... 62
37	Mandvi Servants' Association, Bombay	... 200
38	BB and CI Railway Workmen's Union	... 2,000
39	Journalists' Union, Bombay	... 18
40	RIN Dock Clerks' Union	... 72
41	Madras Labour Union	... 800
42	Gas Workers' Union	... 702
43	NW Railwaymen's Association, Lahore	... 70,000
44	Clerks' Union, Rawalpindi	... 60
45	Audit Clerk Union, NW Railway, Lahore	... 71
46	Talathi Sangh Ahmednagar	... 248
47	Cawnpore Majur Sangh	... 1,800
48	Punjab Clerks' Union, Lahore	... 122
49	Postal Association, Ahmedabad	... 113

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Full title of the Union</i>	<i>Strength of the Union</i>
50	Bombay Presidency Postal Association	... 72
51	SI Railway Employees' Union, Madras	... 93
52	Bombay Millhands' Union	... 52
53	Madras Cooly Union	... 189
54	BOC Employees' Union, Bombay	... 802
55	MSM Railwaymen's Union, Madras	... 812
56	Khand Basar Servants' Union	... 56
57	GIP Railway Audit Clerks' Union	... 85
58	Deccan Postal Association, Satara	
59	Clerks' Union Poona	
60	Talathis' Association, Ratnagiri	
61	Kamgar Hitawardhak Sabha	
62	Bombay Cloth Merchants' Servants' Union	
63	The Mitsui Employees' Union, Miraj	
64	RMS and Postal Employees' Union, Ahmedabad	
65	Bombay Chauffeurs Mutual Benefit Union	
66	Ceylon Workers' Federation, Colombo	
67	Railway Workmen's Association, Ranighat	
68	Press Workers' Union, Delhi	
69	Madras Policemen's Union	
70	Workmen's Union, Karachi	
71	MSM Railway Engineering Workmen's Union, Arkonam	
72	Madras Central Labour Board, Madras	
73	B. N. Railwaymen's Association, Kharagpur	
74	District Clerks' Union, Amraoti	
75	Railway Workmen's Association, Jamshedpur	
76	Railway Workmen's Association, Jamalpur	
77	Railway Workmen's Association, Allahabad	
78	Railway Workmen's Association, Lucknow	
79	RMS Association, Madras	
80	UP Postal and RMS Union, Lucknow	
81	Punjab Postmen's Union, Lahore	
82	Postal Clerks' Union, Lahore	
83	Postal and RMS Union, Cawnpore	
84	Military Accounts Association, Poona	
85	The Peons' Association, Poona	
86	Rajnandnagar Millhands' Union, Rajnandnagar	
87	Podanur Ry. Employees' Union, Podanur	
88	Coimbatore Labour Union, Coimbatore	
89	Majur Sangh, Gamalpur (CP)	
90	Madras Rickshawalas' Union, Madras	
91	BB and CI Workmen's Union, Ahmedabad	
92	Calcutta Postal Club, Calcutta	
93	Provincial Postal & RMS Association, Lahore	
94	Lokraj Factory Workmen's Union, Jubbulpore	
95	Madras Postmen's Union, Madras	

- 96 Indian National Seamen's Union, Calcutta
- 97 Press Men's Union, Calcutta
- 98 Government Press Workers' Peace Establishment Union, Delhi
- 99 Press Workers' Union, Lahore
- 100 Railway Workmen's Association, Igatpuri
(through Mr. Pryke)
- 101 Railway Workmen's Association, Jhansi
(through Mr. Laskari)

Additional List

1	Bombay Port Trust Staff Union (Engineering Dept.)	...	800
2	Wallace Flour Mill Union	...	150
3	Simplex Mill Union	...	1,100
4	Oudh and Rohilkand Railway Union	...	10,000
5	Globe Mill Union	...	3,000
6	Indian Seamen's Union, Bombay (additional)	...	5,944
			20,994

It transpires from the above list that unions of various categories of workers were affiliated or sympathetic to AITUC. Even the government employees' unions were either affiliated or allied to it. Of course, many of the unions stayed away at the beginning, but subsequently came closer and became affiliated to AITUC.

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4. *Ibid.*
5. *Source Material for A History of the Freedom Movement in India*, collected from Bombay Government Records, Vol. II, p. 317-18.
6. AITUC—*Fifty Years, Documents*, Vol. I, Introduction, pp. ixii, ixiii.
7. *Ibid.*, p. ixiii, Italics original.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 24.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 51.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
29. *Ibid.*
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31. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 79.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 84.

SECOND SESSION OF THE ALL INDIA TRADE UNION CONGRESS 1921

Bombay to Jharia :

THE Annual session of National Congress held at Nagpur in December 1920 finally announced the new goal of 'attainment of *Swaraj* by peaceful and legitimate means'. This, however, marked a little advance from the earlier aim of Congress of colonial self-government within the Empire. But as prophesied by Gandhiji there seemed hardly any chance of visibility of *Swaraj* by 31 December 1921. There was no relaxation on the part of Gandhiji to bridle the surging mass movement, but advance of the people was irresistible. The economic struggles of the workers and mass political actions assumed a high degree of militancy and sometimes burst forth in the form of uprising. Gandhiji did not approve of these revolutionary struggles, he directly opposed it. The anti-imperialist upsurge of the workers and masses in Bombay, the anti-British militancy of the peasants of Chouri Choura all were condemnable to him. Painfully he declared, the image of *Swaraj* which he was witnessing through these bloody uprisings was not the object of his desire.

But despite his pain and disapproval, the course of history was changing. The peasant uprisings, economic struggles of the workers and finally the all-India political general strike on 17 November 1921 raised the anti-imperialist struggle to a higher peak.

These circumstances favoured the workers to further advance with their class demands. In 1921 alone, six lakhs of workers were involved in 376 strikes and lock-outs.

Internationally also the political and economic struggles of the workers made significant strides. Under the able leadership of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, Soviet Union, the new-born State of the working class smashed the international counter

revolution and foreign imperialist intervention and marched forward consolidating the achievements of the revolution. The advance of Soviet Union proved irresistible and its impact was felt all over the world.

The European working class too was in full swing of the post-war tide. Whether in Britain, or in France or in any other western capitalist country, the working-class movement registered a steady advance. But the political reactions of the post-war period divided the international working-class movement in two distinct courses. One section was led by the International Federation of Trade Unions of Amsterdam and the other was led by the Red International of Trade Unions of Moscow.

This national and international situation had enough bearing on the proceedings of the second session of AITUC. Side by side with revolutionary success, imperialist intervention, civil war and intrigues of the uprooted landlords and kulaks caused, however, a famine-like condition in Soviet Union. It was a glory that the second session of AITUC discharged its international obligations in this regard.

The national situation also was amply reflected in the second session. What was regretfully missing in the inaugural session, thanks to the indecision and wavering of the national leaders, became materialized in this session—a resolution was adopted demanding Swaraj.

As for the labour more than a hundred big trade unions had, meanwhile, grown up and during the pendency of the second session the entire coalfield area of Jharia, the venue of the session, had been vibrating with an indefinite strike of the mining workers which gloriously ended with a 50 per cent increase in the miners' wages.

Amidst this situation, the second session of the All India Trade Union Congress commenced on 30 November 1921 at Jharia.

Salient Features of Second Session :

The Executive Committee in its session held on 30 July 1921 at Servants of India Hall, Bombay under the chairmanship of Lala Lajpat Rai decided to hold the second conference of All India Trade Union Congress in November of that year in the coalfield area of Jharia at Bihar. It was further decided that

Mr. Joseph Baptista would preside over that conference and Swami Viswananda, the labour leader of the coalminers would form a Reception Committee for the purpose.

The second session of AITUC accordingly commenced on 30 November 1921. The delegates coming from different parts of the country were present in large numbers representing practically all branches of labour in India. The conference pandal was packed with visitors—miners, men, women and even children.

Prominent among those on the dais were:¹ Swami Viswananda, Mr. Shyamsundar Chakravarty, Swami Darsanananda, Messrs. Hardevdas Agarwalla, D. D. Tacker, Karamshi Khora, Keshavji Pitambar, Madhabji Jivan, Nibaran Ch. Sircar, K. Parekh, Lala Narain Singh, Seth Chhaganlal, Dr. Daulat Ram, Mrs. Savitri Devi, Messrs. E. L. Iyer, Jalil Khan, I. B. Sen, M. D. Dalvi, D. Chaman Lall, Thengdi, J. H. Patterson, Simpson, Gilchrist, R. A. Mucadum and Prof. Kaushik of Bombay.

The proceedings opened with the singing of labour and national songs, and the singing of the *Bande Mataram*. Mr. Ramjash Agarwala, a coalmine owner of Jharia who was elected Chairman of the Reception Committee then delivered his welcome address.

It was remarkable that the whole place of the conference was decorated in *Khadi* cloth and a great majority of the people attending the session wore *khadi* and Gandhi caps.

It was further noteworthy that leaders of the National Congress evinced a greater interest in the second session than in the previous one. Excepting Gandhiji, other eminent Congress leaders sent congratulatory messages to the conference. The Congress leaders and other important personalities who sent letters and telegrams sympathizing with the object of the conference and wishing it success were: Mr. C. R. Das, Lala Lajpat Rai, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. Sarala Devi Choudhurani, Mrs. Avantikabai Gokhale, Pandit Motilal Nehru, Mr. Aswini Kumar Dutta, Mr. J. L. Banerjee, Mr. S. Satyamurti, Babu Rajendra Prasad, Mr. S. A. Brelvi, Seth Jamunalal Bajaj, Dr. M. B. Welkar, Mr. Gopal Achari, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Lala Gobardhan Das, Sardar P. Singh, Mr. V. M. Pawar, Messrs. Chandika Prasad, K. V. Joshi, Singaravelu, F. J. Ginwala, S. H. Jhabwala, G. S. Kanthi, Kanji Dwarkadas and Dr. N. D. Sawarkar.²

Not only in national context, internationally also much

importance was attached to this Jharia session of AITUC. Quite significantly the British Bureau of the Red Trade Union International, London, addressed a letter to the chairman of the conference. Besides this, notable trade union organizations and personalities from abroad who sent messages to the conference were:³ Workers' Welfare League of India (London), Scottish Trades Union Congress, Irish Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (Dublin), Miners' Federation of Great Britain, Mr. Bowerman, M. P. (London), Norwich Labour Party Industrial Council; E. L. Pelton, Esq. (London), Elizabeth Wilson (Liecester), George Kempton (London), Independent Labour Party (London), G. C. Briston, Esq., General Union of Textile Workers (Huddersfield), Kettering Trades and Labour Council, Alfred Hill (Liecester), National Federation of Building Trade Operatives (London), G. L. Page, Indian Trades Union (Mombasa).

The letter addressed by Messrs. Tom Mann and N. Watkins of the British Bureau of Red Trade Union International was specially remarkable. This was the first time the British workers addressed their Indian class brethren from a genuinely proletarian outlook. In utter condemnation of imperialist savagery, this matchlessly worded historic letter said:⁴

In your great gathering in the dark and dusty coalfields of Bengal, where your fine human beings are ground down to dull slavery by the ambitions of capitalist exploiters of our country, we send you today hearty greetings. As the British Bureau of the Red Trade Union International, we convey to you, not only our British greetings, but even the greetings of the workers of other lands that are all now united in this great movement. Comrades, in wishing you success, we know that we are wishing success and freedom to us all. A short-sighted labour movement of the past did not realize this great factor, and permitted the slavery of western capitalism to be enforced upon the innocent, helpless human beings of the East and we have now all seen the result.

Comrades, reflect for a while upon the world as it now lies shattered, divided, oppressed and looted. The thoughtless western workers, united together in that ignominious Amsterdam International, have themselves brought this ruin upon the world. They were played off as the very tools and instruments of their capitalist bosses, and murdered one another, and robbed and looted one another. The soldiers of Britain and of Europe that march into the peaceful countries of the Far East to enslave mankind and to rob the natural wealth of foreign soils, are all members of the proletariat and of the working classes that are members of the Amsterdam

International. They talk of their freedom from oppression, of their own masters and thus they remain as imperialist and sectional as their own capitalist masters.

It is no use offering further comment upon the follies and vices of the old world. Let us all put our shoulders together and work for a different new world in which there is no imperialist race and no conquered races. The earth belongs to workers.

We wish you every success in organizing the 18,000,000 of your great and cultured population, who today are living by industrial work and handicrafts. We invite you to join the great new world movement of international solidarity on absolutely equal terms. Nay, we go further and we ask you to join us as much for our benefit as for your own, for we realize that so long as you are slaves and you are not free we cannot be free in the west. We trust that one of the first acts of your new committee will be to enter into communication with our British Council of this new International. We also hope that your Committee will instruct your agents in London, namely, the Workers' Welfare League for India, to enter into communication with us on your behalf. We have watched from a distance the comic methods of the British Trades Union Committee, members of which are as imperialist in their outlook as their own masters, and we have seen how, in order to please the India Office bureaucrats, they have for the last two years, defied your wishes and prevented your trusted comrades, like Mr. Horniman and Mr. Saklatvala, from attending their congress, and stating the true facts of your case. We would welcome any comrade that you may appoint to attend our periodical conferences in Great Britain and we also trust that within a very short time, we shall be able to see, alongside our British section, our friends, comrades and brothers from India coming over to take part in the congresses of the Red Trade Union International.

With many hearty wishes for your success, and with every promise of our support and co-operation and hearty good will.

It may be pointed out here that the fifth sitting of the Executive Committee of AITUC held on 30 July 1921 nominated Mr. B. G. Horniman and Mr. Shapurji Saklatvala to represent AITUC in the session of the British Trade Union Congress in September of that year.

The strong anti-imperialist content of this letter, coming as it did from an organization of the British workers, at a time when the British imperialists had been adding enormous prosperity to British economy by enslaving and brutally exploiting the Indian workers and the people will remain unforgettable for all time to come in the history of Indian labour and more so in the annals of India's struggle for national freedom. This letter

brilliantly reflected the revolutionary and international outlook of the proletariat and held out the historic truth that the workers of all countries belong to the same class, their interest is undivided and liberation of the colonial people from imperialist yoke is necessary as much in the interest of the colonial people as in the interest of liberation of the workers of the imperialist country itself from the capitalist system of wage-slavery.

The resounding call of the letter for a shoulder to shoulder fight against imperialism by the workers the world over in the colonies and in the imperialist countries alike and to create a new beautiful world far exceeded the limitations of the moment and invaluable contributed to the initial development of a sense of international fraternity and proletarian consciousness of the Indian working class.

The entire content and spirit of this letter was basically different from what the representative of the British Labour Party said in the inaugural session of the AITUC.

One remarkable decision taken in this session signified the first manifestation of the international fraternity of the Indian working class. While facing the twin dangers of foreign intervention and civil war, Soviet Russia got into another calamity by visitation of severe famine and epidemic. Conscious of its international obligations, Jharia session of AITUC on the one hand expressed sympathy with the famine-stricken people of Russia and decided to send a token help and on the other appealed to the international working class to stand by the Soviet people in their fight for peace.

The change in the national situation was also well reflected in the proceedings of Jharia session. In the period between the first and the second Congress, the freedom movement had gathered enormous momentum and as already pointed out, the Nagpur session of the National Congress put *Swaraj* on the agenda. So the first resolution that came up for discussion in Jharia session was that of *Swaraj*. The resolution on *Swaraj* moved by Dewan Chaman Lall said, 'That this Trade Union Congress declares that the time has now arrived for the attainment of *Swaraj* by the people of India.' In a befitting reply to the sham propaganda that there was no relation between *Swaraj* and labour, Mr. Chaman Lall, while moving the resolution, said that *Swaraj* was not for those who rolled in luxury, drove in

motor cars and dined at Government House, but for those millions of human beings who by their labour swelled the wealth of the rich. He further said that the *Swaraj* they would have was not to be the *Swaraj* of the capitalists but the *Swaraj* of the workers. The resolution after being seconded by several other speakers was accepted by prolonged cheers and raising of hands by the delegates.⁵

The second resolution accepted by the session was symbolical of Gandhian thinking. This resolution was very forcefully moved by Mrs. Savitri Devi of Darjeeling, which stated, 'That this Trade Union Congress recommend India to adopt Swadeshi and encourage both hand spinning and hand weaving'. Adoption of this resolution actually meant support of Trade Union Congress to the Charkha-economy of Gandhiji. Alongside an incipient proletarian consciousness, this further indicated the political domination of Congress ideology over the Trade Union Congress of that time.

Another noteworthy feature was the acceptance of a resolution against war. War was condemned as a source of tremendous evil to the working class. The conference urged upon the workers of the world to organize concerted action against international warfare.

Besides these, several other resolutions for organizing strike fund, for mitigating various problems of the coal mining and railway workers, for protection of interests of the immigrant Indian labourers and on participation in International Labour Conference etc. were adopted. A separate resolution also demanded abolition of differential treatment on racial lines in regard to pay etc.

All India Trade Union Congress was founded in Bombay session, but without the Jharia session its foundation was not complete and in fact these two sessions together gave it a complete shape.

Till Jharia session the Trade Union Congress remained basically under Congress politics and this political domination of bourgeois ideology, continued for some years more. The presidential speech of Mr. Baptista at this session betrayed a painful poverty of political thought. While defining the path to be followed by the AITUC he said,⁶ 'Our policy must be to steer clear of extreme individualism and Bolshevism and follow the golden

mean of fabian socialism.' The Trade Union Congress had to struggle hard to 'steer clear' of these political absurdities of the bourgeois philistines and assimilate the political philosophy of the revolutionary working class.

New rays of social and philosophical thoughts, meanwhile, started illuminating the political sky of India. Marxian theory of scientific socialism greatly influenced a small stratum of young Indian intellectuals. Its inevitable impact fell on the Trade Union Congress also. Emergence of a revolutionary philosophy and a new political thought confronting the compromising and reformist bourgeois political ideology of Congress, in course of time, pushed AITUC through a path full of clashes and collisions. The subsequent history of All India Trade Union Congress is therefore a history of relentless ideological conflicts bringing about alternately division and reunification a number of times.

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FIRST APPEARANCE OF MARXIAN THOUGHT IN INDIA AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE WORLD PROLETARIAT

THE national and international situation which the Indian working class faced after 1920 was significant in many respects and a proper appraisal thereof is essential to correctly follow the subsequent course of Indian working-class movement. This chapter is therefore devoted to a brief analysis of the major national and international events intimately concerning the progress of Indian labour.

National Events :

Peremptorily restraining the great sweep forward of anti-imperialist upsurge of the Indian people, Ahmedabad Congress held in December 1921 sought to firmly establish the leadership of the bourgeoisie over the national liberation movement of India. In the event of other leaders being thrown behind the bars, Gandhiji became the virtual dictator of Congress. And belying the hopes of the people restive for a countrywide struggle, the Congress concluded without any plan of action.

But this moment of overpowering confusion in India's freedom struggle was marked, however, by the appearance of a new political thought among a small section of the Indian youths. First Marxist groups began to appear in India and though in an extremely limited extent, Marxian world outlook began to project itself in the political and trade union movement of India.

Meanwhile, *émigré* Communist Party of India was founded in Tashkent of Soviet Union on 17 October 1920 and obtained recognition by the Communist International in 1921.¹ Inside India also the communist youths, though numbering a few, devoted themselves to the propagation of socialist ideas through their writings and speeches.

Just at the moment when the bourgeois leadership of Congress got visibly nonplussed at the surging anti-imperialist emotion of the masses and tried to put a bridle on it, the *émigré* Communist Party of India under the dateline 1 December 1921 issued a manifesto addressing the delegates of the Ahmedabad session of Indian National Congress. This manifesto of the *émigré* Communist Party of India epitomized the Marxian alternative to the bourgeois-reformist line of thinking in specific conditions of India. This first published manifesto of the newly founded party² pointed out the immense significance of worker-peasant awakening and their struggle and on this count this was the first of its kind in Indian political history. Considering the great historical significance of this lengthy document and its relevance to the subject matter of this volume, certain essential portions of it are reproduced below. The manifesto declared:³

. . . . The Indian nation today stands on the eve of a great revolution, not only political but economic and social as well. The vast masses of humanity, which inhabits this great peninsula, has begun to move towards a certain goal; it is awakening after centuries of social stagnation resulting from economic and political oppression. . . .

. . . . The toiling masses of the cities, the dumb millions in the villages must be brought into the rank of the movement if it is to be potential. How to *realize the mass organization* is the vital problem before the Congress. How can the man working in the factories or labouring in the fields be convinced that national independence will put an end to his sufferings? Is it not a fact that hundreds of thousands of workers employed in the mills and factories owned by rich Indians, not a few of whom are leaders of the national movement, live in a condition unbearable and are treated in a manner revolting? Of course, by prudent people such discomforting questions would be hushed in the name of the national cause. The argument of these politicians is "let us get rid of the foreign domination first." Such cautious political acumen may be flattering to the upper classes; *but the poor workers and peasants are hungry. If they are to be led on to fight, it must be for the betterment of their material condition.* The slogan which will correspond to the interest of the majority of the population and consequently will electrify them with enthusiasm to fight consciously, is "LAND TO THE PEASANT AND BREAD TO THE WORKER". . . .

The Congress must not always urge the people, which can be called the classical example of suffering and sacrifice personified, to suffer and sacrifice only. *The first signs of the end of their age-long suffering should be brought within their vision. They should be*

helped in their economic fights. The Congress can no longer defer the formulation of a definite programme of economic and social reconstruction. The formulation of such a constructive programme advocating the redress of the immediate grievances of the suffering masses, demanding the improvement of their miserable condition, is the principal task of the 36th Congress.

What has the Congress done to lead the workers and peasants in their economic struggle? It has tried so far only to exploit the mass movement for its political ends. In every strike or peasant revolt the non-co-operators have sacrificed the economic interest of the strikers for a political demonstration. . . .

The workers in the cities demand higher wages, shorter hours, better living conditions; and the poor peasantry fight for the possession of land, freedom and excessive rents and taxes, redress from the exorbitant exploitation by the landlord. They rebel against exploitation, social and economic; it does not make any difference to them to which nationality the exploiter belongs. *Such are the nature of the forces that are really and objectively revolutionary; and any change in the political administration of the country will be effected by these forces. The sooner the Congress understand this the better.*

. . . . If the Congress would lead the revolution which is shaking India to the very foundation, let it not put its faith in mere demonstrations and temporary wild enthusiasm. Let it make the immediate demands of the Trade-Unions, as summarized by the Cawnpur workers, its own demands; let it make the programme of the Kishan Sabhas its own programme, and the time will soon come when the Congress will not stop before any obstacle; it will not have to lament that Swaraj cannot be declared on a fixed date because the people have not made enough sacrifice. It will be backed by the irresistible strength of the entire people consciously fighting for the material interest.'

. . . . Let the Congress cease to engage in political gambling and vibrate in response to the social forces developing in the country. Let it prove by deeds that it wants to end foreign exploitation not to secure the monopoly to the native propertied class, but to liberate the Indian people from all exploitation, political, economic and social Then Swaraj will be won not on a particular day selected according to the caprice of some individuals, but by the conscious and concerted action of the masses.

Through this manifesto the *émigré* Communist Party projected a new line of thinking in the anti-imperialist struggle of India which so long had remained beyond the conception of the bourgeois leadership. This was the first time when the significance of the worker-peasant mass struggle was put forth in right perspective and the question of the people's political, economic and social liberation was brought to the fore. But un-

challengingly led by the bourgeoisie and fully permeated by their ideology as it was, the National Congress could not, however, be moved to the slightest extent by the new political thinking of this manifesto. But in later period this social and political philosophy got concentrated expression outside Congress and marched ahead.

Meanwhile, the Bardoli decision and the imbecility of Ahmedabad session inevitably caused a receding tide in the national political movement of the country. All being quiet in the political front, communal killings raged in certain parts of the country. Muslim League too left Congress and appeared with a separate entity.

Struck with dismay at the unreal and emaciated political line of Gandhiji, a section of the Congressmen under the leadership of Mr. C. R. Das and Mr. Motilal Nehru formed the Swaraj Party within the Congress itself. They decided to take part in election and push ahead with the movement through the Legislative Councils. Gradually by 1925 the followers of Swaraj Party gained majority in the Congress. The leaders of Swaraj Party intended to break the deadlock created by Gandhiji and to open the flood-gate of struggle. But again, the leadership of this new party having been vested with the propertied classes, in reality this was impossible for them also. To effect a thorough change it was essential to come in aid of and carry forward the worker-peasant mass struggle. But this meant unleashing a simultaneous movement of the worker-peasant masses against imperialism for national freedom as well as against the exploitation of foreign and native capitalist classes and feudal lords. It was, however, impossible for the higher class leadership to encourage and intensify these revolutionary activities of the worker-peasant masses.

So, when successfully getting through the elections in 1923 the Swarajists entered the Central Legislative Assembly, they pledged co-operation with the government. But this policy of adjustment with imperialism soon got into its inevitable consequence. As soon as the British Government noticed the receding tide and became sure of the isolation of the Swarajists from the mass movement, they sought to further tighten up their grip on the administration and economy of the country. At the end of 1927, the British Government announced the appointment of

'Simon Commission', but not a single representative of the Indian people was included in this Commission.

But, by now, new forces had started appearing and a new consciousness had also started manifesting among the people. The realization of the necessity of conducting simultaneous struggle against foreign imperialism and native exploitation began taking concrete shape. The small Communist groups formed in Bengal, Bombay, Madras, Lahore and other places began establishing connections among themselves and embarked upon an humble attempt to propagate socialism.

The *émigré* Communist Party of India sent a programme for consideration of the Gaya session of the National Congress held in 1922. Congress did neither formulate a full-fledged programme on the basis of an objective study of India's condition, nor did it raise the demand of complete national independence. Initially Colonial Self-Government, then improved to the demand of *Swaraj*, that was the objective of Congress. The implication of *Swaraj* was also not clear. The Swarajists could not spell out its actual form. Right at this moment when total haziness of objective dogged the Indian National movement, the *émigré* Communist Party of India presented a clear-cut programme before the Congress session spelling out an unambiguous objective of complete national independence.

This 'Programme of National Liberation and Reconstruction' demanded:⁴

1. Complete National Independence, separated from all Imperial connection and free from all foreign supervision.
2. Election of the National Assembly by Union Suffrage. The sovereignty of the people will be vested in the National Assembly, which will be the supreme authority.
3. Establishment of the Federated Republic of India.

The social and economic programme included *inter alia* abolition of landlordism, introduction of modern methods in agriculture and development of modern industries with State aid, eight-hour working day, legal fixation of minimum wages in all industries, rendering legal status to workers' organization and recognition of workers' right to strike including several other progressive measures for the workers and peasants, full social, economic and political rights for the women, secularism,

abolition of the standing Army and arming the entire people for defence of National Freedom.⁵

With a view to translating this programme into reality, an 'Action Programme' was also declared which envisaged:⁶

1. To lead the rebellious poor peasants in their struggle against the excesses of landlordism and high rents.

2. To back the demands of the peasantry by organizing countrywide mass demonstrations with the slogan of "Non-payment of rent and taxes".

3. To organize mass resistance against high prices, increase of Railway fare, postage, salt tax, and other indirect taxation.

4. To struggle for the recognition of Labour unions and the workers' right to strike in order to enforce their demands.

5. To secure an eight-hour day, minimum wage and better housing for the industrial workers.

6. To back up these demands by mass strikes to be developed into a general strike at every available opportunity.

7. To support all strikes politically and financially out of Congress Fund.

8. To agitate for freedom of press, platform and assembly.

9. To organize tenants' strikes against high house rents in the cities.

10. To build up a countrywide organization of national volunteers.

11. To organize strike of the clerks and employees in the Government and commercial offices for higher salaries.

12. To enter the councils with the object of wrecking them.

13. To organize mass demonstrations for the release of political prisoners.

The men at the helm of Gaya Congress did not, of course, submit this programme for consideration of the delegates. But the programme received fairly wide circulation. Reuter telegraphed the entire Programme. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and other newspapers also published it. Muzaffar Ahmad observed,⁷ 'Historically it should be remembered that the Programme sent to Gaya was the first Programme of the Communist Party of India. This programme was unique in Indian politics. This was the first time that people's demands were put forth in such a fashion.'

Fourth Congress of the Communist International which was

in session in Moscow from 5 November to 5 December 1922 sent a message to the Gaya session of National Congress. While expressing 'the fullest sympathy and support of the revolutionary proletarian masses of the imperialist countries including Great Britain' to the historic struggle of the Indian people 'to free themselves from British domination', this message urged that 'in order to declare its complete freedom from all connection with the reactionary upper classes, the National Congress should categorically declare that its political programme is the establishment of a Democratic Republic completely independent of any foreign control.' And 'The necessity of developing the revolutionary consciousness of the masses demands the adoption of an economic programme, in addition to the political programme of a republic to be established through a revolution', added the message.⁸

The activities of the Indian Communists in and abroad, their connection with the Communist International caused grave concern to the British Imperialists. Awakening among the workers and their militant economic struggle greatly alarmed the imperialist government. Hence their attempt to nip it in the bud. In 1924 the government imprisoned Muzaffar Ahmad, S. A. Dange, Shaikat Usmani and Nalinibhusan Dasgupta and accused them of propagating Bolshevism in India. In this trial noted as 'Cawnpore Communist Conspiracy Case, 1924', charges of conducting Communist activities and propagating Communist ideas in India, organizing the workers and peasants and similar other accusations were brought against the prisoners. The programme which the Communist Party sent to the Gaya Congress was cited by the government as the basis of the charges framed against them. During the trial all the four were declared 'guilty' and were sentenced to four years' imprisonment each.

This trial was an overt attempt on the part of the imperialist government to smother the embryonic working-class political movement of India. But reversely this eventuated into a broader sweep of working-class political struggle and quicker diffusion of working-class philosophy in the country.

Failure and contrary result of this suppressive operation were evidenced in the immediate coming together of various groups of militant political workers and rendering a political expression to this new ideal. Those committed to socialism or

with a leftist inclination in or outside the Congress and those with a militant outlook in the trade union movement came closer and primary forms of working-class political organizations started coming out. Bearing the name Workers' and Peasants' Party—these organizations came into being in various parts of the country. The first Workers' and Peasants' Party was formed in Bengal on 1 November 1925. Next it came in Bombay on 8 February 1927. In the Punjab it was formed on 12 April 1928 with the name 'Kirti-Kisan Party'. The United Provinces followed suit and saw the birth of the Party on 14 October 1928.⁹ Thus when the parties sprang up separately in several provinces, these were united into the All India Workers' and Peasants' Party in a convention held in Calcutta from 21 December to 24 December 1928. Mr. Sohan Singh Josh of Punjab and Mr. R. S. Nimbkar of Bombay were elected president and secretary respectively. Muzaffar Ahmad remained the secretary of Bengal branch.¹⁰ The young Indian Communists started working within the Workers' and Peasants' Party.

This party did not, however, accurately symbolized the working-class philosophy, rather this first attempted political expression suffered from many forms of initial confusion. Despite imperfections and lack of political clarity, it typified the stride forward of new political forces and the growing political awakening of the Indian working class.

International Events :

After the foundation of Communist International (Third International) in 1919 by Lenin, the Third Congress of this International was held in Moscow in June 1921. This Congress immensely contributed to the organization of world-wide revolutionary struggle of the working class.

Successfully beating off the armed intervention of world imperialism, Soviet Russia was at that moment moving with rapid stride, confirming on the one hand the historical inevitability of the collapse of capitalism and on the other the irresistible progress of the new socialist system. Standing as a citadel of world socialist revolution, Soviet Russia was beckoning the toiling masses of the imperialist countries and oppressed peoples of the colonies to rise up in revolutionary struggles.

National liberation movement in the colonies and semi-

colonies generated a revolutionary tide. The anti-imperialist and anti-feudal liberation struggle of the Mongolian people became victorious in 1921 and independent Mongolian Republic was ushered in.

The advance of the national liberation struggle was, however, contrasted by a perceptible ebb in the revolutionary struggle of the toiling masses of the capitalist countries. Aided by the social-democrats, the ruling bourgeoisie succeeded in temporarily halting the progress of the revolutionary proletarian struggle in the capitalist countries that gained new heights at the close of the year 1920 and at the beginning of 1921. The strikes and uprisings of the proletariat in north Italy, Czechoslovakia and Central Germany were brutally crushed by the bourgeoisie.

Despite sharp economic crisis gripping the capitalist countries during 1920-21, the working classes of those countries had to remain content with defensive struggles, that too mostly unsuccessful, in the face of mounting offensive of the bourgeoisie.

Backed by the reformist leaders who had retained influence over majority of the working class, the European and American bourgeoisie skilfully combined a policy of terror and suppression with that of manoeuvring and concession. In this phase of retreat of the revolutionary upswing in the capitalist countries, the organizational influence of the social-reformists and power and experience of the bourgeoisie worked upon the insufficient political maturity and illusion of the masses and led them to the naive belief that their interests could be safeguarded under a bourgeois democracy. This resulted in a considerable number of workers and other strata of toiling masses failing to discern the right revolutionary path and thus following the lead of the social reformists.

Reformism so deluded the working masses that in 1921 the Social-Democratic and Socialist parties could enroll a membership of nearly eight million, while the reformist-led International Federation of Trade Unions (the Amsterdam International) had about twenty-two million members.¹¹

Preaching 'class peace' and 'the growing of capitalism into socialism', the Right reformist leaders of the socialist parties and the trade unions declared that in the post-war world the proletariat could reach socialism without a revolution through Parliamentary democracy and therefore the task of the prole-

tariat was to score victories in parliamentary elections. The irresistible consequence of this dangerous policy was witnessed at the most crucial moments of class struggle with the Social-Democrats often assuming the role of executioners of the revolution.

Sabotage of the class struggle by the reformist leaders weakened the force of the proletariat and enabled the bourgeoisie to administer a temporary defeat on the working class in the capitalist countries. Despite decelerating the world revolutionary process, the bourgeoisie and the reformists were powerless to stop it. The general crisis of capitalism further accentuated and the situation remained an objectively revolutionary one.

In the midst of this world situation the third Congress of the Communist International discussed the role of the trade unions and tasks of the Communists among the working class. The Congress strongly assailed the idea of trade union neutrality in the political struggle as peddled by the reformists. The Congress characterized the Amsterdam International of Trade Unions as the mainstay of international capital in the working class and laid down the task of fighting it and combating the splitting tactics of the reformists.

Third Congress of the Comintern coincided with the First International Congress of Revolutionary Trade and Industrial Unions held in Moscow from July 3 to July 19, 1921. Lenin attributed immense significance to this Congress. In a message of greeting to this Congress Lenin said,¹² 'it is hard to find words to express the full importance of the International Congress of Trade Unions. The winning of trade unionists to the ideas of communism is making irresistible headway everywhere, in all countries, throughout the world. The process is sporadic, overcoming a thousand obstacles, but it is making irresistible progress. The International Congress of Trade Unions will quicken this movement. Communism will triumph in the trade unions. No power on earth can avert the collapse of capitalism and the victory of the working class over the bourgeoisie.'

Revolutionary trade unions, by this time, had been functioning in a number of countries and the TU Congress felt the necessity to unite them. So the TU Congress decided to set up a united militant organization, a single international headquarters—the Red Trade Union International (the Profintern). Simultaneously

the Congress directed the revolutionary workers to win the reformist unions without quitting them and without forming separate, disunited trade union groups.

S. A. Lozovsky was elected as the General Secretary of Profintern. This international centre united the trade union centres and trade unions outside the fold of Amsterdam International. They were:¹³ The All Russia Central Council of Trade Unions, the National Revolutionary trade union centres of Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Columbia, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, France, Holland, Indonesia, Ireland, Korea, Lithuania, Mongolia, Persia, Peru, Uruguay, and also opposition groups and trends within the reformist trade unions in a number of capitalist countries.

The Congress actively supported the ideas of unifying trade union movement on the basis of revolutionary struggle against the onslaughts of capital and fascism and against the danger of imperialist war and urged closer relation with the working class of Soviet Russia.

Simultaneous with the establishment of a separate international centre of the revolutionary trade unions, international communist movement was, however, very much keen for unity of the world trade union movement. The Fifth Congress of the Comintern which opened in Moscow on 17 June 1924 adopted an important resolution on Lozovsky's report on the question of world trade union unity. The resolution stated:¹⁴ 'The fight for unity in the world trade union movement has occupied a very prominent place in the activities of the Comintern. This is the case, not because the Comintern makes a fetish of organization, but because it is convinced that by fighting for unity within the trade unions, communists are extending the sphere of influence of the Communist parties and of the Communist International, while keeping all the time in contact with the masses. The fight for unity of the trade union movement is the best means and method of winning the masses.'

The Fourth Congress of the Profintern held in Moscow in July 1924 further advanced the slogan of a united international of trade unions and resolved to commence negotiations with the Amsterdam International and the General Council of British trade unions, the Left wing of which favoured unity of trade union movement.

Fascism in Italy, by now had appeared as a grave danger to the revolutionary movement of the working class. The Congress therefore discussed the aims of anti-fascist movement in Italy and pointed out that the outcome of the fight against fascism depended on the degree of activity of the broad masses, chiefly of the whole working class and the Communist Party.

While the united front tactics of the working class and the method of struggle against fascism were being formulated and implemented on an international scale, the surging tide of national liberation movement spurred the anti-imperialist forces to greater activity. The representatives of a number of anti-imperialist organizations met in Berlin in February 1926 and formed a League Against Colonial Oppression. The meeting decided also to convene a representative International Congress of Oppressed Peoples.

Accordingly, the World Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism opened in Brussels on 10 February 1927. The Congress was attended by representatives of the oppressed peoples, the working class and intellectuals of 37 metropolitan and colonial countries. One of the most important resolutions moved jointly by the British, Indian and Chinese delegations and adopted by the Congress urged the working class of the imperialist countries to fight side by side with the oppressed peoples and 'achieve liberation in accordance with the doctrine of class struggle'.¹⁵

The Congress resolved to set up an international organization called The League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression and For National Independence. Georgi Dimitrov wrote in July 1927, 'The World Anti-Imperialist League was set up as an organization working against imperialism, mainly in the large colonies and semi-colonies It embraces the Balkans too extending the common front of the peoples from the Balkan Peninsula to China and India, Latin America, Syria, Morocco, Egypt, Afghanistan, Iran, and others in an anti-imperialist world front.'¹⁶

The third decade of this century, thus, witnessed a gathering strength of the world anti-imperialist forces and growing consolidation of the revolutionary working class against capitalism and its protector social-reformism. The working class and the anti-imperialist forces stood poised for an uncompromising fight

in the international arena. But contrastingly, in India opening of this decade saw a calculated slowing down of the tempo of the national liberation movement from above while the people below had been restlessly awaiting a courageous lead. The working-class movement of India during this decade could not naturally be free from the impact of these national and international events—ideological and organizational, rather its advance was marked by the full burden of these cross-currents.

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ECONOMIC RECESSION : DEFENSIVE STRUGGLE OF THE WORKING CLASS 1922-26

Exploitation Intensified :

RECESSION in Indian industry and economy began already in the year 1922 and continued intensifying. In 1929 the impact of the world economic recession and the general crisis of world capitalism veritably shocked the Indian economy. The working class of India therefore had to confront an extremely difficult situation. It was consequently not possible for the working class to achieve new concessions during this period, rather they had to engage in a resolute struggle to defend what they had already achieved.

Grave recession on the one hand and intensification of imperialist exploitation on the other, more conspicuously manifested the morbid effects of the colonial character of Indian economy. The World War I though provided a number of industries with some temporary advantages or opportunities to expand and saw the limited growth of some new industries, in real sense India's industrialization during the War was absolutely of a sprawling character and without any basic consolidation. The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms though offered special representation to the industrial, commercial and feudal interests of India, in the post-war years the British capital became impatiently keen to preserve the Indian market as its exclusively privileged zone. The fiscal policies of the British Government were also openly directed to protect the interests of the British capital. This inevitably resulted in a sharpening of the conflict between the Indian and British capitalist interests.

Meanwhile, Japan's bid to capture market as a formidable rival to western capital further worsened the condition of India's industry. This cut-throat competition of international capital combined with extreme impoverishment of the Indian people resulted in a serious shrinkage of the country's market. Con-

fronted with this unfavourable situation, the Indian textile mill owners conveniently directed attacks on the working class in a bid to strengthen their own position.

The millowners attempted to reduce wages of the workers. It is a particular misfortune of the colonial working class that they have ultimately to fall victim to the intense rivalry between the imperialist and native capitalists. But the workers did not lie low before that onslaught, they resisted. So in order to safeguard its position the working class of India had to proceed through a path of bitter struggle.

This economic offensive reduced the standard of living of the workers. The investigation conducted by the Bombay Labour office into the working-class budget of 1921-23 revealed that the quantity of daily food consumed by the Bombay workers was less than that available to the inmates of the prison houses. An enquiry conducted by the Madras Labour Department also revealed a similarly shameful state of affairs. Even in this third decade of the century, the housing condition of the workers was most inhuman. Rate of infantile mortality was appallingly high. In his speech at the International Labour Conference in 1938 Mr. S. V. Parulekar characterized it as a 'massacre of working-class infants'.

The mill-owners' plan for rationalization of the industry caused further deterioration of this steadily depressed condition. Shrinkage of the home market while resulted in a crisis of over-production, rationalization of industry generated a further crisis by severely restricting employment potential. Indeed, between 1922 and 1927 the number of workers in most of the principal industries remained virtually static, while in some the number came down. The position will be mostly clear from the figures relating the main three industries of cotton, jute and coal-mining.

Cotton Textiles¹

Year		Mills	Operatives
1922	...	264	3,27,000
1923	...	271	3,24,000
1924	...	275	3,25,000
1925	...	281	3,32,000
1926	...	275	3,39,000
1927	...	280	3,43,000

Jute Textiles²

Year		Mills	Operatives
1922	...	85	3,20,000
1923	...	88	3,27,000
1924	...	90	3,39,000
1925	...	88	3,42,000
1926	...	91	3,33,000
1927	...	90	3,32,000

Coal Mining³

Year		Mines	Average Daily Employment
1922	...	953	1,84,355
1923	...	942	1,82,601
1924	...	846	1,87,088
1925	...	810	1,73,140
1926	...	722	1,70,628
1927		644	1,65,213

The real import of the number of industrial workers remaining static is to be understood in the background of a fast increasing population of the country. According to census reports the population of India between 1921 and 1931 increased from 318 million to 352 million. This increase in population naturally swelled the number of able-bodied persons in need of job. Though born in village, the overburdened village economy could not provide these job-seekers with any avenue of employment and so they left village and crowded the industrial centres in search of job. This was the first time when the industrial centres of India were provided with an abundance of labour force, which in other words meant every year supply of labour started becoming proportionately greater than demand.

This was a completely new situation in India's labour market. Previously it was the labour who was in great demand, now reversely it was the job for which the labour had to compete. Royal Commission on Labour in India studied this situation and noted,⁴ 'Perennial factories, on the other hand, have now reached a position in which most of them have sufficient labour at all seasons and there is a surplus of factory labour at several centres.

The change has been gradual, and it has proceeded at a different pace in different centres. . . . speaking generally, it would be true to say that the turning point came during the last five years. Up to that stage, labour tended to have the upper hand in that there was competition for its services; since then the tendency has been for the workers to compete for jobs.' Concluding that 'Indian Factories are at the beginning of a period of plentiful labour', the Commission very significantly observed,⁵ 'It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this change. In the past the employers' powers were strictly limited. The necessity of keeping their factories staffed has led some employers to do much for the welfare of labour in the provision of housing and other benefits; it has also compelled them to tolerate much in the form of low efficiency and slack discipline. The new condition, if maintained, will give to the employer a great power, for good or for ill, than he has had in the past. At the same time they will deprive labour of what has hitherto been its main defence against oppression.'

This overcrowding of the industrial centres by unemployed labour force combined with serious limitation of employment potential of the industries meant a very disadvantageous situation for the working class in its fight against capital. This did not end as a temporary feature, on the contrary this disadvantage became a permanent phenomenon in the life of Indian labour. More so, this persistently disadvantageous situation was a factor peculiar to the working class of the colonial countries. The working class of the metropolitan countries did not have to plod through such a perennially unfavourable condition except during the periods of crisis.

The working class of India had therefore to wage struggles during these years under very difficult conditions and as already stated the struggles were of defensive nature. So the explosion of struggles that was experienced during 1920-21 lost much of its heat and the number of actions considerably reduced between the years 1922 and 1927. From 1927, however, commenced an opposite current and in 1929 the extent and intensity of the working-class actions were restored to the high degree of 1920-21.

The bitter struggles of this period were usually of prolonged nature and many a time ended unsuccessfully. After the expan-

sion of the struggles in 1927, those in the year 1928 were of more bitter and prolonged nature.

The statistics compiled by the Royal Commission on Labour in India in regard to these actions make the position fairly understandable.

Statistics of Industrial Disputes⁶

Year		Number of stoppages beginning during the year	Number of workers involved (thousands)	Number of working days lost (in lakhs)
1921	...	376	600	70
1922	...	272	435	40
1923	...	209	301	51
1924	...	132	312	87
1925	...	133	270	126
1926	...	127	187	110
1927	...	129	132	202
1928	...	200	507	316
1929	...	134	531	122
1930	...	145	196	23

These statistics clearly indicate the downward trend of the number of disputes since 1921 and its subsequent upward swing from 1928. Investigation of the Royal Commission on Labour in India revealed that about two-thirds of these strikes occurred on the question of wages and bonus and the rest against retrenchment, dismissals and such other problems. In other words, these defensive actions took place in as much as to defend the achievements in respect of wages, bonus etc. as against the onslaughts of retrenchment and dismissals.

These strikes involved various industries in different provinces of the country. Avoiding inessential details, relevant events of some of the important strikes which are sufficient for understanding the trend and character of the existing situation are discussed below.

Some Important Strikes :

Just only after two years of the serious strike that took place in the Tata Iron and Steel Works at Jamshedpur, there

occurred another big strike in the same steel plant in September 1922.

Great changes were, meanwhile, taking place in the domain of iron and steel. The world prices of steel were falling and wages were being reduced in Europe, while the Tata Company during the same period embarked upon a policy of extension which almost doubled their capital.

The Labour Association in this condition submitted a memorandum to the management demanding among others, reinstatement of two dismissed employees, recognition of labour union, eight hours' general shift, no compulsory overtime and bonus. The strike commenced on 19 September 1922 and was complete. But the management's adamant attitude prolonged the strike and caused apparent weariness among the workers. Dewan Chaman Lall came down to Jamshedpur on October 20 as a representative of AITUC and an agreement with the management was reached on certain terms which included formation of a conciliation committee of ten from each side to arrange a settlement of the workers' demands. The question of recognition of the union was assured to be taken up by the AITUC. On these terms the men returned to work on October 23.

But almost immediately the management dismissed several employees including Mr. G. Sethi, the secretary of the Association and consequently a serious tension developed. Further, the management's insistence to include non-strikers in the conciliation committee aggravated the crisis.

Amidst this growing unrest the conciliation committee ultimately met in 1924 at Jamshedpur. On the workers' side the Committee was headed by Mr. C. R. Das and included Mr. Chaman Lall, Mr. N. M. Joshi, Rev. C. F. Andrews and others from outside as well as members of the Labour Association. In addition Mr. Motilal Nehru and Mr. Rangaswami Iyengar attended the Committee meeting as visitors. An understanding was arrived at on most of the points, but deadlock arose over recognition of the Association, particularly inclusion of Mr. G. Sethi. This was, however, obviated by agreeing to reorganize the union with Rev. C. F. Andrews as the president. The management then recognized the Association and re-employed Mr. G. Sethi.

Among the strikes of this period, those of the cotton textile

workers were especially remarkable. Demand for bonus was one of the main characteristics of these strikes. By then workers had started considering bonus as 'deferred wage'.

In October 1922, about three thousand textile workers of Surat went on strike demanding annual bonus amounting to 42½ per cent of average monthly wages. The local Collector intervened in the dispute and asked the workers to accept 25 per cent bonus. The workers were not sufficiently organized and so ultimately the strike fizzled out and two hundred workers were removed from service.

Serious discontent was brewing among the mill operatives of Ahmedabad for non-implementation by the owners of an award of the previous year. Moreover, the Mill-Owners' Association announced 20 per cent cut in the wages of the workers with effect from 1 April 1923. 43,000 workers of 56 mills came out on strike against this decision of wage-cut. The strike continued for more than two months resulting in a loss of 2,400,000 working days. The workers were involved in a very hard struggle, but there was no sufficient fund to sustain the strike. Exhausted at the prolongation of the strike, many workers had to leave the industrial centre for their village-homes. Ultimately Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association accepted arbitration award of 16 per cent wage-cut and the men returned to work.

Egged on by the success of the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners in effecting wage-cut, the Bombay Mill-Owners' Association too decided in July 1923 to stop payment of annual bonus to the workers which they had been getting for the last five years. This decision of the mill-owners highly aggrieved the workers and they resolved to resist. 160,000 textile workers of Bombay went on strike from 17 January 1924. This strike continued for more than two months causing a loss of 7,75,000 working days. Mr. Joseph Baptista, former president of AITUC and other labour leaders advised the workers against the strike, but when it started they made hectic attempts for a settlement. The workers on their part were moreover apprehensive of a wage-cut following stoppage of bonus. Anyway, under the chairmanship of Mr. Baptista and with Mr. Sahasrabudhe as the secretary, a committee was set up for bringing about a settlement of the strike. The other members associated with the

committee were Messrs. N. M. Joshi, H. S. Jhabwala, F. J. Ginwala, Kanji Dwarkadas and two workers.

This committee urged upon the government for an arbitration, but the mill-owners refused to go by any arbitration. The mill-owners argued that bonus depended upon profits and good-wishes of the owners and it was no part of the wages. The owners declared a lock-out. But even this threat when failed to cow down the workers, then in deference to government's recommendation they agreed to submit the question of bonus for adjudication, but on one condition, that the terms of reference of the committee should be approved by the owners. The government then set up a Committee of Enquiry presided over by the Chief Justice of Bombay and according to the management-dictated terms of reference, the Committee was to report: 'whether the workers have any enforceable claim, customary, legal or equitable, to the bonus, and whether comparing the profits with those of the previous years the demand of the bonus was not justifiable'. In this condition conclusion of the enquiry was obviously foregone. On March 12, the Report of the Committee was published which totally in favour of the owners stated that the workers had no enforceable claim to a bonus and that the profits were such as would not admit of a bonus being paid.⁸

This prolonged strike was a glaring instance of the workers' resoluteness and dogged determination to go ahead with a tortuous struggle in the midst of an allround adverse condition. With their wages withheld for a long period, with no strike fund, without any outside help and above all being only loosely organized, the workers steadfastly stuck on for about two and half months. Further, the strike was not without blood-shed. There took place some clashes and the police opened fire upon the striking workers. After the publication of the Report of the Enquiry Committee the strike came to an end on 25 March 1924 and police pickets were withdrawn from the factory premises.⁹

The overzealous mill-owners made further onslaughts on the workers. In July of that year they announced reduction of food allowance which resulted in 11½ per cent cut in the workers' wages. This happened in spite of the rise of the wholesale and consumer price indices to 180 and 190 respectively (1914=100)

as indicated by the statistics prepared by the Bombay Labour office in the same month.¹⁰

These successive offensives of the mill-owners created a serious situation in the textile industry of Bombay. The All India Trade Union Congress felt highly perturbed and urged upon the government to appoint a committee to inquire into the condition of that industry and to suspend all wage-cuts pending publication of its report.

An attempt at mediation on the question of reduction of food allowance was made by some members of the Legislative Assembly headed by Mr. Motilal Nehru, but the mill-owners refused to accept any mediation. On the other side, the Governor of Bombay too declined to intervene in this dispute and even expressed his inability to consider the employers' demand of abolishing cotton excise duty for relaxing, as they said, the financial strain on the industry.

The workers were compelled therefore to go again on strike. At the first instance, the workers of some mills struck work from 15 September 1925 but by September 26 the strike wave engulfed all the mills. A total of over 160,000 workers joined the strike resulting in a loss of 11,000,000 working days. The strike tended to prolong and was by far of the most serious nature in the textile industry of Bombay.

Having stubbornly stuck on for nearly six weeks enduring immense suffering, the workers came to the threshold of victory. The Viceroy of India announced on 1 December the government's decision to suspend cotton excise duty and following close to the heels of the this decision, on 3 December, the mill-owners announced withdrawal of their decision to reduce wages. Jubilant with success, the workers then returned to work.

The cotton excise duty suspended on 1 December was abolished altogether subsequently. It was a funny thing that the mill-owners compelled the government to concede to this demand of theirs by launching an economic onslaught on the workers and forcing them to go on strike.

Resoluteness of the workers in waging this protracted strike surprised many. During the strike at least sixty per cent of the workers left the city for their villages and many eked out a living by selling vegetables etc. A relief committee was also

formed under the chairmanship of Mr. N. M. Joshi in aid of the strikers. The Bombay Municipal Council too distributed reliefs to the striking workers. Moreover, many other organizations of the country sent financial relief to the workers.

But the most important event was the receipt of fraternal help by the striking Bombay workers from the workers abroad. British Trade Union Congress, International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam; International Federation of Textile Workers' Association, London; and Moscow Textiles Workers' Union sent monetary relief to the striking workers. In his work 'Communism in India 1924-1927', Sir David Petrie, the then Director of Intelligence Bureau, Government of India noted the following:¹¹

The All India Trade Union Congress Committee, Bombay, received a cable expressing good wishes of U.S.S.R. (Central Council of Trade Unions, Moscow) Textile Workers and promising a sum of 10,000 roubles to help the strikers. Manifestos were issued from Amsterdam sympathizing with the strike.

For the help of the strikers the following sums were received from foreign countries:

1. Rs. 6,472-10-0 from the British Trade Union Congress, London.
2. Rs. 17,591-5-4 from the International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam.
3. Rs. 6,049 from the International Federation of Textile Workers' Association, London.

Besides this, the Moscow Textile Workers' Union sent Rs. 13,832 through Mr. Saklatvala to N. M. Joshi, Secretary, AITUC. Out of the amount a sum of Rs. 2,000 was received during the strike and the balance, Rs. 11,832 when it was over. This balance was held in trust by a committee consisting of Messrs. F. J. Ginwala, S. H. Jhabwala, N. M. Joshi, R. R. Bakhale and Kanji Dwarka Das as a nucleus for the Bombay Labour Relief Organisation Fund.

Another important strike of this period occurred in the North Western Railway. This strike was organized by the North Western Railway Union, in which the principal figures were an ex-guard Mr. J. B. Miller and Mr. M. A. Khan and Mr. H. T. Hall. The strike originated in the North Western Railway workshops at Rawlpindi on 15 March 1925 and soon it spread throughout the entire North Western Railway. Though the strike sparked off on the issue of disciplinary action against a union activist, strikers had other demands too which included wage-rise, eight-hour

working day, stopping retrenchment and reinstatement of all men retrenched since 1920.

22,000 workers participated in this protracted strike. The Railway authorities resorted to brutal repression to smash the workers' struggle, in the face of which, the strike collapsed in early July of that year. But after the withdrawal, only 14,000 workers out of a total 22,000 were allowed to join duties and the rest 8,000 were discharged from service.

This strike attracted the attention of the trade union organizations in England. On 22 May 1925, the *Workers' Weekly* of London wrote, 'This is a matter which deserves to be taken up by the Trade Union Movement in this country. . . . It is a Trade Union in India which is being attacked. The Trade Union Congress had declared the desire to investigate the question of Indian Labour Organization. Here is a case with which a beginning might be made.'¹² Lansburg's *London Weekly* of July 4 wrote, 'Last month the strikers on the North Western Railway marched in procession as a protest against press statement that the strike had collapsed. They carried a red flag. Nothing unusual. But that flag was once white. It was stained by the blood of the strikers.'¹³ Referring to this allusion, Sir David Petrie wrote that those taking part in a strikers' procession at Lahore 'theatrically dyed a white flag with blood taken from their bodies, as illustrating their determination to fight to the death to gain their objects.'¹⁴

The Workers' Welfare League of India in London which represented the Indian workers sent monetary aid to the strikers of North Western Railway.

Not only in North Western Railway, in East India Railway and in G.I.P. Railway too strikes occurred already in 1922 and 1923 respectively.

In the East Indian Railway, the strike occurred in February 1922 centering Asansol. The confidential report of the Government of India preserved in the National Archives stated,¹⁵ 'The strike on the East India Railway has spread to Asansol where Swami Darsanananda has been largely instrumental in bringing the men out. The crowd at Asansol is a rough one and a company of native infantry has been sent there to protect that and neighbouring stations on the main line. It was also intended that the Iron Works at Kulti should strike simultaneously with the

railway. . . . There are rumours that Biswananda Swami intends to get the coalminers out too, and at a recent meeting it was definitely stated on his authority that the combined strike of Asansol, Kulti and the coal areas must result in immediate *Swaraj*.'

The report further revealed that on February 22, armed police opened fire on the strikers at Burdwan Railway Station injuring three workers.

The strike of the railwaymen created consternation among the English population. On 8 April 1922, *Englishman*, a Calcutta newspaper which represented direct British interests, published in a vein of panic a story about alleged molestation of the English women by the striking workers. In the background of this panicky propaganda, the government dispatched Gurkha troops to put down the strikers. The soldiers committed barbarous repression on the railwaymen. Even the secret official report stated,¹⁶ 'On the 10th March, the lines of Gurkha Chowkidars at Asansol were burnt, and although no proof is forthcoming that this was the work of strikers, the Gurkhas broke loose and attacked everyone near the place. . . . fortunately at the time of occurrence the strikers were attending a mass meeting some distance away, otherwise a more serious collision might have taken place.' Failing, the government tried to break the strike by other means. The secret report admitted.¹⁷ 'An attempt was made to break the strike by introducing M/s. Bird & Co.'s coolies to replace the railway labourers.'

The secret report relating to the month of March stated,¹⁸ 'Strike on the E. I. Railway continues, but there are signs that the end may not be far distant. The conference which met on the 20th March with a view to arrange for a sympathetic strike in other railways and in collieries and factories was an entire failure. In his public speeches, for some time past Swami Biswananda has been attempting to enlist the sympathy of the subordinate ranks of the police, but so far without any apparent success.'

In the face of this tremendous repression and strike-breaking attempts, the strikers could not, however, ultimately hold on. Collapse of the strike was officially reported on 18 April 1922.

In December 1923 the G.I.P. Railway authorities declared

a lock-out in the Matunga Workshop of the railway in reply to an agitation by the workmen. The intention of the authorities was to retrench a number of men. The official report itself stated,¹⁹ 'the Railway company do not mind keeping the works closed for some weeks, the strikes having given them an opportunity of reducing numerical strength of the hands in view of the policy of allround retrenchment.'

The textile workers of Bombay also felt the impact of this strike in Matunga Railway Workshop. According to the official report,²⁰ 'The Matunga affair has had an apparent reaction on the millhands in the city. They have for some time past been contemplating a general strike over the decision of non-payment of Bonus, and the atmosphere which the Matunga Workers are creating among them seems to have intensified their attitude.'

The workers of Matunga returned to work after the lock-out was lifted in January 1924.

Growth of Trade Unions :

The textile workers of Bombay were still not well-organized during their widespread strikes in 1924 and 1925. Only seven unions were affiliated to the Central Labour Board formed by AITUC in Bombay Presidency in 1922. But soon that organization too proved ineffective. After the strike in 1923 Girni Kamgar Sangh was formed consisting of three unions. But its affiliates were both small and weak. In 1926 Bombay Textile Labour Union was formed at the initiative of Messrs. N. M. Joshi and R. R. Bakhale. The former became the president of the union and the latter its secretary. This was the first registered union in India under the Indian Trade Union Act, 1926. By 1928 its membership rose to 8,234. The textile workers of Bombay though, thus started getting organized during the years 1925-27, the really powerful organization of the textile workers was born only after the strike of 1928. This was 'Girni Kamgar Union', born as the fighting union of the textile workers with an officially admitted membership of 40,000.

Despite organizational weakness of the textile workers of Bombay, fairly organized trade unions of the Railwaymen, Seamen, Port workers and Postal employees started developing during this period. With regular membership and subscription collection, with provincial and district branches and with all

other structural ramifications and necessary activities, these trade unions assumed organized forms. Trade Unions developed also among the jute and coalmining workers of Bengal and the steel-plant workers of Jamshedpur, but organizational character of these unions were comparatively weak. In 1925 Bengal Jute Workers' Association was formed. Mr. Sibnath Banerjee, just returned from Moscow, was secretary of this union.

It is, however, difficult to precisely ascertain the number of trade unions that existed in India during 1921-25. Dr. R. K. Das in his work 'Labour Movement in India' estimated 77 unions in 1921 with a membership of 1,000,000. According to AITUC, 113 unions existed in 1922. In 1924 and for the first time in the history of Indian labour, a systematic attempt was made by the All India Trade Union Congress to collect information about all the trade unions in India and to measure accurately the strength of Indian trade union movement. The Directory of Trade Unions, 1925 published by the AITUC gave a list of 167 unions grouped industrywise as indicated in the following table.²¹

Trade Unions in India in 1924

Group	Total No. of Unions	Unions furnishing returns	Member- ship
I. TRANSPORT			
(i) Railway	... 25	10	97,702
(ii) Shipping	... 6	3	14,500
(iii) Other transport	... 6	3	6,300
II. TEXTILE			
(i) Cotton	... 23	17	30,795
(ii) Jute	... —	—	—
III. ENGINEERING AND ALLIED INDUSTRIES			
(i) Chemical, Glass, Pottery etc.	... 3	1	500
(ii) Iron, Steel, Metals	... 3	2	9,000
(iii) Other Engineering	... 5	2	825
IV. NON-MANUAL			
(i) Banking	... 3	2	1,610
(ii) Currency	... 4	3	1,120
(iii) Clerks, Teachers	... 4	1	500
(iv) Commercial	... 4	1	2,600

Trade Unions in India in 1924—*Contd.*

	Total No. of Unions	Unions furnishing returns	Member- ship
V. MISCELLANEOUS			
(i) Government and Municipal servants	... 37	4	9,150
(ii) Mining	... 2	1	400
(iii) Paper and Printing	... 5	3	710
(iv) Posts and Telegraphs	... 18	14	37,625
GENERAL LABOUR	... 19	1	10,000
TOTAL	... 167	68	2,23,337

But this was not obviously a comprehensive list. A major lacuna was the absence of information about the trade unions of the workers in the jute industries, one of the principal and well established industries of the country. Provincewise break-up of 183 unions of the country as shown in the All India Trade Union Bulletin (October-November 1924 and January 1925), the official organ of AITUC were:²² Bombay—61, Bengal—51, Madras—36, U.P.—8, C.P.—8, Punjab—8, Assam—2, Bihar and Orissa—2, N.W.F.P.—2, Delhi—2, Burma—2 and Ceylon—1.

The statistics indicate that in 1924 trade unions developed mostly in Bombay, Bengal and Madras Presidency and the principal industries covered were cotton and jute textiles, communications and government establishments. Big federations that developed amongst the employees of Posts and Telegraph Department and the Railwaymen were especially noteworthy. All India Postal and R.M.S. Association and All India Railwaymen's Federation were born in 1920 and 1925 respectively. Details about the evolution of trade unions of the government and other white collar employees will, however, be discussed separately in this volume. But besides this, there also developed certain other federations like Bengal Trade Union Federation, Bombay Central Labour Board and the South Indian Railway Board, Coimbatore. The former two were practically provincial branches of AITUC.

The growth of these unions were not necessarily uniform. Many were organizationally loose with negligible membership.

Some strange contrasts were also observed. While the workers in the Port were organized, those in the Dock remained outside. The growth indicated another trend, the sense of unionism was more among the skilled workers than those unskilled. With this organizational variance, the attitude to struggle also greatly varied.

Another feature of this period was the tendency of the management to float scab unions. During the strike of the North Western Railway workers, a scab union was promptly floated by the railway authorities simultaneously with the arrest of Mr. J. B. Miller, the leader of the North Western Railway Union. Moreover, The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, founded in 1898, which was a management-patronized organization, tried to sabotage the strike.

The episode of refusal by the management of the Tata Iron & Steel Works to recognize the Jamshedpur Labour Association as discussed already was a classic example of the attitude of the management towards trade unions.

In Madras too as a rival to the Madras Labour Union, the management organized 'Buckingham & Carnatic Mill Employees' Association', as a conglomeration of black-legs.

The defensive character of the working-class movement of this period was adequately reflected in the sessions of the AITUC also. The glamour of the first and second sessions and the deep enthusiasm evinced by the workers on these occasions and their large-scale participation therein were not perceptible in some of the subsequent sessions. Whereas the first session in 1920 claimed to have represented one million workers, the representation came down considerably in 1922 and in 1925 the situation further worsened.

Over the government also a declining influence was noticed. In spite of the fact that the AITUC selected Mr. Joseph Baptista for representing the Indian labour at the Sixth Congress of the International Labour Organization, the government refused to send him and decided to send Mr. K. C. Raychowdhury of Bengal instead. The Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress and All India Trade Union Congress lodged protest against the official nomination of Mr. Roychowdhury, yet the decision of the government remained unaltered.

National Congress on Labour Movement :

Mr. C. R. Das, the eminent Congress leader presided over the third session of the All India Trade Union Congress. And as has already been noted, the first president of AITUC was Lala Lajpat Rai, who was also a former president of the Congress.

National Congress did not ever recognize labour movement from the angle of class struggle. Proletarian ideas were alien to them. Many elements in the Congress even possessed definite anti-working-class bias. Some approached the labour from humanitarian point of view. Many were more inclined to preach morality among them than to organize their economic struggle. Rather, their economic struggle particularly against the native capitalist exploitation was mostly disfavoured by the Congress leadership. Imbued with bourgeois ideology, Congress could never consider the working class as the most uncompromising and revolutionary force against capital and imperialism. But on the whole, Congress considered this vast unorganized mass as a conveniently utilizable material in the interests of the national movement. Thus, Congress was prepared up to the extent of viewing the working class in a role subordinate to the bourgeoisie and not more than that. And so with the gradual sharpening of the class-consciousness of the proletariat, clashes and contradictions between the revolutionary working class and the reformist bourgeoisie became more and more manifest as an inevitable phenomenon in the political history of India.

Just on the eve of the first AITUC session in 1920, the Amritsar session of the National Congress held in 1919, resolved from their own viewpoints, to organize the labour into trade unions. The following year, the Nagpur session of the Congress directed the All India Congress Committee to appoint a committee consisting of Lala Lajpat Rai, Mr. C. R. Das and Miss Anushabai Sarabhai to give effect to the resolution regarding labour. The resolution on labour adopted in Nagpur session stated: ²³ 'This Congress expresses its fullest sympathy with the workers in India in their struggle for securing their legitimate rights through the organization of trade unions, and places on record its condemnation of the brutal policy of treating the lives of Indian worker as of no account under the false pretext of preserving law and order. The Congress is of opinion that

Indian labour should be organized with a view to improve and promote their well-being and secure to them just rights and also to prevent the exploitation (i) of Indian Labour, (ii) of Indian resources by foreign agencies; and that the All India Congress Committee should appoint a committee to take effective steps on that behalf.'

It is to be noted that the resolution felt the necessity of organizing labour 'to prevent the exploitation of Indian labour by foreign agencies' *only* and not a word has been spoken in regard to exploitation by native capital. Further, Nagpur session was held in December 1920, after two months from the date of formation of AITUC. Yet this Congress resolution on labour did not contain a single word about AITUC, the first all-India organization of the Indian labour. This is no mere accident, rather it is not impertinent to conclude that the Congress was in a mind to organize the labour outside AITUC. Gandhiji's aversion towards formation of AITUC tends to confirm this view. Another event in this connection requires to be closely examined. Lala Lajpat Rai was nominated by the AITUC to represent Indian labour in the International Labour Organization. But in the meeting of the executive committee of AITUC held on 31 July 1921, Lalaji expressed his inability to represent in the ILO and so Mr. N. M. Joshi was selected in his place. Lalaji further humbly submitted his resignation from the presidentship of AITUC on the ground of ill-health. These events—Lalaji's expressed inability to represent in ILO, his resignation from presidentship and Gandhiji's antipathy towards AITUC's formation—if taken together, it would not be unreasonable to infer that till Nagpur session, Congress was disinclined to recognize AITUC as their desired organization of labour. It would not also be too much to assume that Lalaji's non-acceptance of nomination to ILO and his ultimate resignation from the presidentship were an outcome of Gandhiji's disliking.

Despite its initial repulsion to the existence of AITUC, very soon Congress came round the reality and had to accept AITUC. Congress adopted a changed tactics and the resolution passed by Gaya Congress in 1922 not only accepted AITUC's existence but welcomed its initiative to organize labour. Moreover, a committee consisting of prominent congressmen was formed to assist the work of the AITUC. The Congress resolved that²⁴

‘While welcoming the move by the All India Trade Union Congress and various Kishan Sabhas in organizing the workers of India, hereby appoints the following committee with power to coopt, to assist the Executive Council of the All India Trade Union Congress for the organization of Indian labour, both agricultural and industrial. (1) C. F. Andrews, (2) J. M. Sengupta, (3) S. N. Halder, (4) Swami Dinanath, (5) Dr. D. D. Sathye and (6) Singaravelu Chettiar’.

This resolution allowed the willing Congressmen to work within the AITUC. Subsequently, many illustrious Congress leaders like Mr. C. R. Das, Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose and Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru became associated with AITUC. The Congressmen who joined the AITUC carried into it their own ideology and way of thinking and that was bourgeois reformism pure and simple. So the conflict that ensued between their principle of class-collaboration and the proletarian tenet of class-struggle altered the objectivity of the initial condition and with the maturing of this conflict, at a later stage, National Congress formally severed all connections with AITUC and formed a new labour organization under the absolute control of their own class ideology.

Sessions of AITUC—Third to Sixth :

The third session of AITUC was held at Lahore on March 24-26, 1923. The city of Lahore was not, at that time, much advanced industrially, Mr. C. R. Das presided over this session. After the Bardoli decision of Gandhiji, Mr. Das was then actively busy in giving a new turn to the national movement by organizing his Swaraj Party. So the event of presiding over the session by a national leader of his stature was undoubtedly significant.

But this session lost much of the lustre of the previous two sessions. From attendance to many other aspects, this session was comparatively pale. A little more than 100 delegates attended this session. It was actually a reflex of the ebbing tide in the political and labour movement of the country.

One of the important resolutions adopted by this session was against war. The resolution stated,²⁵ ‘this Congress is of opinion that war has proved very detrimental to the labouring masses in general and therefore, advises them not to take any part in waging war in future so as not to help any of the belligerents

in any shape or form, especially so if the war is waged unjustly.' The session also urged upon the government to introduce legislation for protection against unemployment, old age and sickness.

The fourth session of AITUC was held in Calcutta on March 30-31, 1924 again under Mr. C. R. Das's presidency. It was attended by about 150 delegates from all parts of the country. Lenin, the great revolutionary leader of the toiling masses of the world, by then passed away. And it was significant that this session adopted resolution condoling the death of Lenin. Through separate resolutions, the session demanded labour representation in the Legislature and franchise for labour and raised strong protest against retrenchment in the railways and against deployment of police and military in the disputes between Labour and Capital. The session also formed a committee consisting of Messrs. D. R. Thengdi, Mukundalal Sarkar, Shamsuddin Hasan and Mrs. Santosh Kumari Gupta for amending the Constitution of AITUC. The Executive Council which met on 17 August 1924 adopted the amended Constitution and decided to publish an All India Trade Union Bulletin as the official organ of the TUC.

This session further nominated the Workers' Welfare League of India, London, as the representative of AITUC in England.

Sir David Petrie has referred to a letter sent by Mr. M. N. Roy to Mr. Mukundalal Sarkar, Secretary of Bengal Trade Union Federation regarding this session. According to Mr. Petrie's information,²⁶ 'M. N. Roy wrote to Mukundalal Sarkar regarding the session of the All India Trade Union Congress, dilating on the betrayal of the working class by their leaders and criticizing the act of Chaman Lall, the secretary of the Congress. He advised that new leadership was essential. He urged Indian labour to send delegates to the International Congress and suggested that the Trade Union Congress should become a truly working-class organization. He added that their goal could only be reached through the thorny path of revolution.'

Regarding the international attempts that were being made during this period to get AITUC affiliated to the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions, Mr. Petrie has noted the following:²⁷

A letter from the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions to a vernacular paper in Madras urged the affiliation of the AITUC with RILU. It was signed by George Hardy, a well-known Communist, who was acquainted with Roy and was associated with him in his anti-British activities in Germany. In his letter Hardy said that his Bureau was deeply interested in the Labour movements of the Far East, and that the RILU had affiliated the Transport Workers of Java and the Chinese Seamen's Union, but that they had been unable to find out very much about the attitude of the Indian workers towards international affiliation; upon which question the writer asked to be furnished with an opinion. He warned the AITUC against being brought into the International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam, by the British Labour Party, which was not likely to oppose British Imperialism. This was followed by a letter from Tom Man, Chairman of the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions, to the secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress, in which the latter expressed the hope that the day was not far distant when, with the British Imperialist domination broken, the Trade Unionists of India would be free to carry forward the task of emancipating the Indian peasants and workers from Capitalist exploitation. Tom Man eulogised the Red International of Labour Union, which was formed by the victorious Russian Proletariat and waged war against Capitalist and Imperialist domination. He concluded by praying that the Indian workers might come in close and lasting contact with the revolutionary workers of Europe and America.

Side by side with these efforts from abroad for international affiliation of the Indian working class, endeavours started in the country also by publication of a number of periodicals to champion the cause of the workers and peasants and to popularize the ideas of socialism. These journals were published by a few communists as well as by some non-communist labour leaders. The first issue of *Socialist*, a journal edited by Mr. S. A. Dange came out from Bombay in 1922. This journal propagated socialist ideas. *Ganabani*, a Bengali weekly came out from Calcutta in 1926. It was edited by Muzaffar Ahmad and devoted to upholding the cause of the workers and peasants and imparted socialist outlook. Likewise *Sramik* edited by Mrs. Santosh Kumari Gupta and *Majdur* edited by Kutubuddin Ahmed, both published from Bengal took up the workers' cause. *Kirti-kisan*, *Spark*, *Kranti* and several other journals published from different places of the country also in a similar way contributed invaluable to popularize working-class ideas and to expose the rapacious character of capitalism. *The Vanguard of*

the Indian Independence, the first fortnightly mouthpiece of the *émigré* Communist Party of India, which had started publication in Berlin from 1923 under the editorship of Mr. M. N. Roy also made its secret way into India. The title of this journal was subsequently changed to *Advanced Guard* and then to *The Vanguard*.²⁸ These were secretly distributed to some selected people in India.

The contribution of these journals in raising the consciousness of the working class and in bringing its problems before the eyes of the people was immeasurable.

The fifth session of AITUC was held in Bombay on 14 February 1925 just after the staging of Cawnpore Trial. The session was attended by 66 delegates and was presided over by Mr. D. R. Thengdi.

In his presidential speech, Mr. Thengdi demanded equitable distribution of necessary articles and distribution of land among the peasants. The session demanded adult suffrage for election to the Central and provincial legislatures. One of the resolutions adopted by the session demanded minimum living wage in all industries, commerce and public services. The session made certain amendments to the Constitution of AITUC, by widening its object to co-operate and federate with labour organizations having similar objects in any part of the world.

The session elected Rev. C. F. Andrews as president and Mr. V. V. Giri and Mr. N. M. Joshi as vice-president and general secretary respectively. An important event which marked this session was the attendance of Mr. Percy E. Glading, a prominent member of the British Bureau of the Red International of Trade Unions. He attended the session as a fraternal delegate on behalf of the Amalgamated Union of Engineers, London. Mr. Glading was also associated with the National Minority Movement in England. While in India, Mr. Glading visited many working-class centres.

The sixth session of AITUC was held at Madras on January 9-10, 1926 under the presidency of Mr. V. V. Giri. 110 delegates representing 27 Unions with a membership of 80,000 out of 52 affiliated unions with a membership of 125,000 attended.

The office of the AITUC was shifted from Bombay to Calcutta after this session.

The session received messages of greetings from the Central

Council of Trade Unions, Moscow, and Red International of Labour Unions. While expressing deep sympathies with the Indian people struggling against imperialist oppression, and for independence and while pointing out that the awakening of the oppressed peoples meant mortal blow to imperialism, the former message stated:²⁹ 'USSR Central Council of Trade Unions is glad to see established direct connection with fraternal trade unions in India and hopes to see in USSR representatives of All India Trade Union Congress.' It further said, 'Close relationship between trade unions of USSR and India serves vital interests of workers of both countries.'

The second message also urged the necessity for establishment of connection between AITUC and trade unions of China, Persia, Egypt, etc., and congratulated the Indian workers on the 'proletarian solidarity' displayed in the 'heroic, victorious Bombay textile strike'.³⁰

Many more messages were forthcoming during this period to the trade unions of India seeking to establish close international links with the Indian working-class movement. In March 1926, the Executive Committee of the Communist International in a telegram sent to the Calcutta Press Employees' Association expressed solidarity with the Indian struggle for freedom and stated that, 'national journalists are very important factor in that struggle. They are breaking down the blockade of India by imperialist press and news agency'.³¹

It is revealed from the writings of Sir David Petrie, the then Director of Intelligence Bureau that the Central Council of Trade Unions of USSR in a telegram dated 24 October 1926 sent to AITUC, Calcutta, asked the latter to send fraternal delegates to the seventh Trade Union Congress of USSR in Moscow. But, Mr. Petrie says, the telegram was intercepted.³²

Endeavours were made by the Indian labour leaders also, during this time, to establish some connections with the labour movement abroad. Mr. N. M. Joshi participated in the International Labour Conference held in Geneva in April 1925. Mr. Chaman Lall accompanied him as his assistant and while addressing the conference he made pungent revelations of the exploitation of Indian labour. In course of his speech he told,³³ 'Those who are familiar with the Indian situation know very well that when no less a person than the late Viceroy of India,

Lord Chelmsford, went to the hills from Simla, he employed peasants who were dragged away from their fields and made to do forced labour in preparing the roads, for His Excellency to travel over.' . . . He then spoke on the meagre wages of the workers in the plantations, mines and jute and cotton textiles in India.

From Geneva the Indian labour leaders visited Paris and London and contacted many notable labour and political leaders who were staunch fighters against imperialism. Mr. Chaman Lall also attended the Bournemouth conference of the British Trade Union Congress on 10 October 1926. Bitterly castigating the British exploiters, in course of his speech, he said,³⁴ 'Let the Empire be wrecked if it means keeping millions of Indian workers in industrial slavery. . . .'

Mr. Chaman Lall also attended a conference of the National Left-wing movement held at Poplar Town Hall, London on 18-19 September 1926. He was accompanied by Mr. Pulin Behari Seal and Mr. Clemens Palme Dutt.³⁵

Along with these efforts, the Workers' Welfare League of India in London also embarked upon the task of publicizing in England the Indian workers' cause and eliciting support for their struggle against economic and political exploitation.

While support and sympathy from abroad for the struggling Indian workers continued flowing in, Indian trade unions on their part too tried to fulfil their international obligations according to their little capacity. In response to a telegram from London to AITUC appealing for financial help to the striking mining workers in England, Mr. N. M. Joshi sent an amount of £600 collected from different labour organizations. Another sum of £35 was sent by Mr. Mukundalal Sarkar on behalf of All India Railwaymen's Federation.³⁶

Character of the AITUC Sessions:

The foregoing discussion reveals the contrast between the AITUC sessions of this period and the previous two. The contrast is specially marked when compared to the Jharia session which was held amidst great enthusiasm with the participation of a large number of worker-delegates. But unlike the previous sessions, in these sessions the middle class organizers were the main participants. In respect of taking decision too, the sessions

betrayed regrettable weakness and limitations. The decisions were stereotyped and restricted to formal appeals to the government. The report of the fifth session had some reference of help and support extended to the strikes of the North Western Railwaymen and Textile workers of Bombay. But no programmes or plans for organization and action were put before the workers.

During this period, AITUC in fact turned out to be a upper level organization with little connection with the workers at the base. It was being utilized more as a political platform for some ambitious leaders than as a fighting forum of the million workers.

Organizationally also it was much loosened. The provincial branches of Bengal, Bombay and Madras had no mentionable activity either. Functioning was limited to sending of delegates only, hardly there occurred any exchange of reports between the centre and the branches. Internal business was nominal. A very few meetings were held with proceedings mostly formal, and other activities conducted were also of purely routine nature. The position of fund was so miserable that annual receipts and payments of the TUC did not exceed even one thousand rupees. After the second session the yearly reports too were reduced to smaller number of pages.

Dismayed with this slovenly way of functioning, some radical-minded delegates attending the fourth session urged for some organizational changes to impart speed to its functioning. This led to certain welcome changes in the Constitution of the AITUC.

The leadership of the organization was still in the hands of the national-reformists. Their political outlook and mode of work greatly influenced the character and functioning of AITUC. So, referring to the third session, *The Vanguard*, the central organ of the *émigré* Communist Party of India wrote on 15 May 1923,³⁷ 'The gathering of Lahore was a working-class affair only in name. The spirit that reigned there was one of pure nationalism and humanitarian idealism. Nationalist leaders represented practically all the classes of our society except the working class. . . .'

But beneath this apparent placidity and emaciation, the storm was gathering. Around the overwhelming sway of reformism the silver lining also started becoming visible. Efforts from

in and abroad to radicalize the workers and their organizations began paying dividends. The next phase of the struggle amply bore testimony to the rise of these new stormy force.

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SHARPENING AND EXTENSION OF STRUGGLE 1926-29

THE years 1926 to 1929 constitute an eventful phase of the working-class movement of India.

A tempestuous unrest in the political and economic life of the country seemed imminent. Indian Communist movement too stood poised for a firm foundation and advance. So communist influence on the working-class movement of this period was felt to be sufficiently strong. Big strikes were conducted during these years. Although the government tried to dub these strikes as 'communist conspiracies', these struggles, led by the communists in many cases, were in fact, a sharp manifestation of the simmering discontent of a working class afflicted with crushing problems. Sharpening of struggles, side by side, acted to further widen the outlook of the working class and this was borne out by the very nature of its activities at level, both national and international.

Raising the bogey of an imminent 'Communist menace', in 1929 the government tried to root out the militant section of the working-class movement by unleashing draconian repression. The government even resorted to the tactics of inciting public opinion against them. With a view to keeping the speeding working-class movement under safe control, they on the one hand introduced the 'The Indian Trade Union Act, 1926' and on the other passed 'The Trade Disputes Act' and 'The Public Safety Act' for tightening up their suppressive designs. In planful co-ordination with these measures to put down the working-class and mass militant movements, the imperialist government through a skilfully-woven intrigue started the 'The Meerut Conspiracy Case' with the holy purpose of freeing India from 'Communist menace'!

New Thrust in Political Struggle :

The imbecile tactics of non-antagonism adopted during the last several years resulted in afflicting the anti-imperialist forces with disunity, vacillation and utter frustration. Spurring out of communal violence further revealed the degeneration.

The imperialists were quick to seize upon this weakness of the national movement and they reoriented their administrative and economic policies in no time with a view to effecting calculated measures of onslaughts in successive stages.

The Currency Bill of 1927 was a serious blow to the Indian economy. Hilton Young Currency Commission, 1925-26, recommended devaluation of rupee and fixing of the rate at 1 s. 6 d. Through the revision of the Indian Steel Protection Bill, 1924 in the year 1927, the government introduced preferential rates for British steel. Thus the fiscal policy of the government was so changed as to discard the tariff system of the early twenties avowedly meant for accelerating India's industrialization and to revert to an era of Imperial Preference.

In consonance with these new economic offensive, in November 1927 the British Cabinet announced in London the appointment of Simon Commission to recommend some more administrative reforms and to examine the suitability of the Indians for Parliamentary democracy. The Commission headed by the British statesman Sir John Simon was without any Indian representation.

Contrary to the hopes of the imperialists, this announcement was instrumental in giving a new sweep to the national movement and in re-uniting the anti-imperialist forces. For the moment the Indian bourgeoisie abandoned all hopes for adjustments with the British imperialists and were compelled to think of harnessing the mass forces. But now the condition was little more difficult for the bourgeoisie. Because the new awakening among the working class and the masses and their preparation for an independent political struggle were directed not only against the imperialists but against the native exploiters as well. This heightening mass discontent and the new character of struggle caused deep embarrassment to the wavering bourgeois leadership and the political agitations that followed amply bore the imprint of this duality.

Congress rejected the Commission and decided to boycott

its proceedings. In a resolution adopted in Madras session held in 1927 Congress refused to be a party to the Commission which was meant for examining the suitability of the Indians for *Swaraj* and which was constituted without any Indian representation and declared it to be a national humiliation. Liberal Federation and initially Muslim League too decided to boycott this Commission.

Mass demonstrations were held throughout the country against this Commission and when on 3 February 1928 the members of the Commission disembarked at Bombay, people in thousands staged angry demonstration shouting 'Simon go back'.

This unity of the people was not based on any political programme, but this common anti-imperialist slogan united the people. But the most significant development at this stage was the massive participation of the working class in this wave of national political struggle. Emergence of the working class as an independent force, thus, set off a new dynamism in the national struggle of India. The working class was not yet able to come to the leadership of political struggle, but their heroic participation in it and the building up of numerous economic struggles and militant trade unions set in motion the process of developing its own leadership. This political advance of the working class succeeded in establishing socialism—their philosophy as a political force in India.

Advance of these radical and left-wing forces had its impact on the Congress also. In the Madras session of Congress the resolution moved by Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru and supported by the followers of Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, declaring complete independence as the goal of national movement was unusually accepted without opposition. This, of course, happened in the absence of Gandhiji who later condemned it as 'hastily conceived and thoughtlessly passed !' This session also decided to affiliate Congress to the newly established International League Against Imperialism. Further, this session elected Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru and Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, who together symbolized the left-wing trend and represented the youth, as the two general secretaries of Congress.

But the victory of the left-wingers in Congress was more apparent than real. This was confirmed by the events of 1928.

The stormy situation created by the wave of workers' strikes, mass demonstrations against Simon Commission, militant movements of the youths and students greatly unnerved the veteran leadership of Congress. So shelving the demand of complete independence, the All Party Conference of Congress, Liberal Federation and Muslim League which met at Lucknow in August 1928 set up a committee headed by Mr. Motilal Nehru for drawing up a draft constitution with the object of forming 'responsible government'.

This committee which was an outcome of the alliance of the Congress veterans with the moderates and reactionaries outside, could not altogether bypass the demand of the youths for complete independence and so cleverly its report tried to define complete independence as 'Dominion Status within Empire.'

Conservatism of this report and its intrinsic anomalies soon caused degeneration of the All Party Conference itself. The conference which met in Calcutta in December 1928 to discuss this report turned to be an open battle field for the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communalists. The Muslim communalists led by Mr. Jinnah and the Sikh communalists walked out of the conference.

A threatening crisis developed. The idea of Dominion Status was more bitterly assailed and the leftwingers within the Congress put pressure for implementation of the resolution for complete independence adopted at Madras. Then at this moment, after six years of political hibernation, Gandhiji again appeared on the scene to salvage Congress from the quagmire of a grave crisis and internal conflict. In the words of Rajani Palme Dutt,¹ 'All the hopes of the bourgeoisie (the hostile might say, the hopes of imperialism) were fixed on Gandhi as the man to ride the waves to unleash just enough of the mass movement in order to drive a successful bargain, and at the same time to save India from revolution.'

Gandhiji attended Calcutta session of Congress in December 1928 and laboured hard to push through this report. It was done on a slender majority and that too with the assurance that in the event of non-acceptance of this report by the government by 31 December 1928, Congress would revert to the decision of non-violent non-co-operation and this time the people would be called upon for a no-tax campaign.

Full one year they wasted this way. And they did it at a time when the mass discontent was at its peak-height.

After one year, the Congress met at Lahore in December 1929. In a condition of smouldering mass discontent, the Lahore session declared Complete Independence as the creed of Congress and authorized the Congress Committee to launch upon a programme of Civil Disobedience including non-payment of taxes whenever it deemed fit. Gandhiji realized the balance of forces and grasped the turn of events. So he rejected the proposal of his being the president of Congress and instead nominated Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru for that graceful office.

At midnight of December 31, as the new year was ushered in Mr. Nehru unfurled the flag of Indian Independence and on 26 January 1930 when the first Independence Day was celebrated throughout India, the pledge to struggle for complete independence proclaimed it a 'a crime against man and God to submit any longer.'

New hopes and aspirations were aroused. People set determined for winning full independence.

Indian Trade Union Act 1926 :

The imperialist rulers did not feel the necessity of legislating any enactment to promote trade union activities and to safeguard the trade union workers. Thus, although the organized trade union movement in India had taken shape just with the end of the war, the Indian Trade Union Act was passed only in the year 1926. But even this Act was made in such a way that the trade unions had to protest against it. Through the amendment of the Indian Penal Code in 1913 the trade unions were virtually reduced to illegal organizations. Since the incident of legal prosecution of Mr. Wadia in 1921, demands were raised for making enactments in regard to the trade unions. So long there existed no legislation to protect the trade union workers in the matter of trade union activities. After prosecution of Mr. Wadia, AITUC made an effort through Workers' Welfare League of India in London to discuss this issue with the British Government. Accordingly, a delegation of British Trade Union Congress headed by Mr. Shapurji Saklatvala met Mr. Montagu, the Secretary of State for India on 22 March 1921. The delegation tried to impress upon Mr. Montagu that

in this infancy of Indian trade union movement the government should come forward to help those who were devoted to the task of organizing the labour and further the government should make the officials in India realize that the workers had the legal right to association and that right needed protection through official influence and power.²

A circular issued by the Government of India in 1921 clarified the attitude of the government in this respect. The circular while referring to the necessity of determining the object and constitution of the trade union, specially emphasized the need for directing the trade union movement on 'right' and 'sound' lines. But the movement having decelerated during 1921-22, the government did not feel much inclined to further proceed with the matter.

In 1921 Mr. N. M. Joshi, nominated member of the Legislative Assembly, moved a resolution in the Assembly urging for making legislation for the registration of trade unions and protection of trade union officials from civil and criminal liability for *bonafide* trade union activities. The imperialist rulers, to whom trade union movement meant nothing more than a law and order problem, strongly opposed this resolution. They wanted to say that Mr. Joshi was seeking protection for violent activities and so this resolution was a dangerous move.

Subsequently, the Assembly accepted a modified resolution moved by Sir Thomas Holland which recommended enactment of legislation for only registration of trade unions and not for any legal protection to the trade union workers. This basic modification completely defeated the two-fold purpose of Mr. Joshi's resolution.

Registration of unions and submission of their constitution and audited accounts to the government were made obligatory by the provisions of Indian Trade Union Act 1926. This Act further provided that the number of 'outsiders' on the executive committee of the union should not exceed 50 per cent of the total strength and the rest must be from among the workers employed in that industry. The Act strictly restricted the legitimate object of spending the general fund of the union and totally prohibited its use for civic and political purposes.

The Indian Trade Union Act 1926 was greatly at variance with the relevant Act in vogue in England during that time. The

Act in India distinguished the registered unions from the unregistered ones, but in Great Britain such distinctions were unknown. Imposition of rigid restrictions on the activities of the unions and on the object of their fund and refusal to grant immunities to the trade union workers from the civil and criminal liability for conducting trade union activities were indicative of the very colonial approach of the government towards the Indian trade union movement. Side by side with these colonial prohibitions in respect of the registered trade unions, section 120B of the Indian Penal Code practically illegalized the collective activities of the unregistered unions. The evidences collected by the Royal Commission on Labour in India contain a number of instances of legal actions being taken against the members and officials of the unregistered unions.

The trade unions of India raised loud protest against the contemplated objects of this Act.

The seventh session of AITUC held at Delhi in 1927 sharply criticized the Act. The provisions imposing restrictions on the use of union fund were especially protested against. It was further demanded that like that in England, in India too, the trade union fund should be free from official restrictions.

In 1928 Mr. N. M. Joshi introduced a Bill in the Legislative Assembly seeking legal facilities for the unregistered unions, but the Bill was defeated. And simultaneously, while spelling out the official view on the controversies that arose in connection with this Act, Sir Thomas Holland, the Minister of Industries told that the object of this Act was to foster the growth of trade unions 'on healthy lines.'

The provisions of the Act and the utterances of the government spokesmen therefore made it amply clear that the government wanted trade unions to develop along an officially charted line. The intention of the government for exercising rigid control on the trade unions was further borne out by the fact of passing the Trade Disputes Act after three years.

The labour leaders of that period were loudly vocal against discrimination between registered and unregistered unions and especially against the attempt at virtual illegalization of the unions of the latter category. They considered that the existence of unregistered unions was natural in the infancy of Indian trade union movement and so it was incumbent upon the

government to extend the protection of law to these unions also. Two of the labour leaders, Lala Lajpat Rai and Mr. N. M. Joshi vehemently spoke in the Legislative Assembly in support of this view.

The Royal Commission on Labour in India 1931, too in their report upheld the declared policy of the government to channelize the trade union activities on 'correct' and 'sound' line and further said that in the interest of trade union movement such an Act should have been introduced in India long before.

In reality, when trade unions in India started crystallizing and the movement burst forth in many parts of the country, it was the tactics of the imperialist government, beset with anxiety and consternation, to keep the trade union movement confined within the narrow periphery of economism and not to allow it to assume political character. The panicky imperialists were out to see that the working class might not in any way join the national liberation movement. And this very motive led the government to provide various restrictive provisions in the Trade Union Act, particularly the provision prohibiting spending of union fund for political purposes. Enforcement of these measures amounted to a naked intervention by the imperialist government in the process of free development of Indian trade union movement.

Economic Condition of the Working Class :

Any system of compilation of correct statistical data in regard to the wage-rates of the workers according to the variance of industry and industrial centre was unknown in the early period and in the period under discussion as well. But various committees, commissions and official observers were agreed on the point that the workers' poverty knew no bounds. Reports published in different newspapers also told the same story. It was the first time in 1934 that the Bombay Labour Office conducted a census of the wage-rates of the textile workers. The census revealed a most anomalous and chaotic condition of wage-rates. Far from any parity of wages, gross discrimination prevailed even over the wage-rates of the workers employed in the same industry and in the similar types of work. The investigation of the Royal Commission on Labour in India too revealed the same discrimination. It transpired that the wages of the

textile workers of Madras and Coimbatore were only one third of the wages of the textile workers of Bombay and Ahmedabad despite the fact that the former two centres had been, at that time, experiencing a fast expansion of the textile industry. At Kanpur, the biggest industrial centre of the United Provinces, monthly wages of a weaver and a spinner were Rs. 33 and Rs. 25 respectively.³ These rates were much lower than those available in Bombay and Ahmedabad.

The investigation conducted by the Bombay Labour office too found very wide variations existing both in methods of payment and the manner in which the rates were fixed not only as between centre and centre but also between unit and unit in a particular centre.

The investigation of the Royal Commission revealed a far more serious disparity. It was observed that in the United Provinces, among the unskilled adult workers monthly wages of 25 per cent of them were below Rs. 13, while wages of above 50 per cent of them were below Rs. 17-8-0. 50 per cent of the workers in the Central Provinces, Madras, Bihar and Orissa received monthly wages below Rs. 17-8-0. 50 per cent of the workers in Bengal got less than 22-8-0. Even in Bombay Presidency where cost of living was comparatively higher, above 50 per cent of the workers received monthly wages below Rs. 27-8-0.

The above figures related to the semi-skilled adult workers who were comparatively better paid. Wages of the unskilled and minor workers were lower. About the wage-rates of these categories of workers, the Royal Commission on Labour in India said:⁴

'Few men in this class are able to earn more than Rs. 15 a month regularly ; the majority earn less and earnings are as low as Rs. 10. The other class, consisting of the large volume of unskilled labour engaged in various miscellaneous occupations on daily rates finding employment in industry either casually or for limited spells, in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and parts of the Central Provinces, are paid the daily rates of roughly 8 annas for men, 6 annas for women and 4 annas for children ; but in Madras, the United Provinces and some parts of the Central Provinces, the rates are as low as 5 annas a day for men.'

The chaos in the service conditions of the industrial workers

of India further manifested itself in another aspect of disparity in wage-rates. In most of the capitalist countries of the world, the wage-rates of the workers in the iron and steel industries almost doubled the rates of wages that prevailed among the workers of other industries. But in India, wage-rates of the workers in iron and steel industries were lower than in the textile industry by about 15 per cent. Monthly wages of the workers in the steel industry of Jamshedpur were below Rs. 20.5. The wages of the mining workers were as low as those of the plantation workers. In 1930, the monthly wages of the male workers of Ranigunj coalfield areas varied between Rs. 12 and Rs. 16 and those of the female workers Rs. 8 and Rs. 12.⁶

But one noticeable characteristic in respect of industrial expansion of the country was the establishment of textile industry as the most organized sector where from the very beginning of Indian trade union movement, the workers had been putting up continuous resistance against capitalist exploitation. This uninterrupted resistance enabled the workers of this industry to secure comparatively better wages. This distinctive feature has certainly to be taken into account while entering into comparative analysis of the wage-rates of the industrial workers of India.

The report prepared by the delegation of the British Trade Union Congress which visited India in 1928, also truthfully depicted the miserable condition of wages of the Indian workers.

The Report said *inter alia*: 'All enquiries go to show that vast majority of workers in India do not receive more than about 1s. per day. In the province of Bengal, which includes the largest mass of industrial workers, investigators declared that as far as they could ascertain, 60 per cent of workers were in receipt of wages of not more than 1s. 2d. a day in the highest instance, scaling down to as low as 7d. to 9d. for men and 3d. to 7d. in the case of children and women. . . Our enquiries support these figures and as a matter of fact, many cases have been quoted to us of daily rates in operation which descend to 3½d. for women and 7d. or even less for men.'

All these meant that the wages earned by the workers of India were not sufficient to meet even the minimum needs of life and so to eke out a bare existence, the children and female members of the working-class families had also to work in most of the cases.

But the government did not make any attempt to investigate the living conditions of the workers. Some attempts were made to prepare the cost of living index of certain provinces, but no facts were collected relating to the working class budgets. In most industrially advanced province of Bengal the government did not even try to determine the cost of living index. Only the Bombay Labour Office tried to investigate into the family budgets of the workers at Ahmedabad, Bombay and Sholapur.

The available reports reveal an appallingly degraded living condition of the working class. A formidably poor diet and want of proper medical assistance condemned them to hard disease and to a high rate of mortality. Expenditure on account of education was, in these circumstances, beyond imagination in the working-class families. So even in the second and third decade of the twentieth century the cultural and educational standard of the working class persisted to miserably lag behind with no prospect of redemption in the near future also.

But this was not the end. These abnormally low wage-rates and the consequential economic miseries ultimately encumbered the working class with recurring debts like the Indian peasantry. The burden of debts on the peasantry was definitely heavier, but the encumbrance of the working class too was not negligible either. The Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India pointed out 'that the majority of industrial workers are in debt for the greater part of their lives . . . the families or individuals who are in debt are not less than $\frac{2}{3}$ (in a later enquiry it was calculated to be $\frac{3}{4}$) of the whole.' The Commission further said, 'we believe that in the greater majority of cases, the amount of debt exceeds three months' wages and is often far in excess of this amount. A debt of even one-fourth of a year's wages is a heavy burden, particularly to a man whose income is little more than sufficient for his bare necessities. But the burden is aggravated out of all proportion by the rate of interest which has to be paid. A common rate is 'one anna in the rupee'. . . This is 75 per cent per annum, without allowing for the effect of compound interest. . . Much higher rates are also charged, hundred and fifty per cent or more per annum being by no means uncommon.'⁸

While the workers were thus condemned to a desperate

condition of life, the mill-owners were contemplating further attack on them on the plea of fall of profits. Foreshadowing this attack, the Report of the Indian Textile Tariff Board, published in 1927, suggested indirect methods of reducing labour costs. The existing bad time, pointed out Mr. N. M. Joshi, in a memorandum submitted to the said Tariff Board, might mean less profit and a little curtailment of some of their luxuries, but these meant a starvation and ruin to the 150,000 workers employed in the mills of Bombay. In fact, it was not a problem of loss which the mill-owners were confronted with but it was the reduction in the amount of super-profits.

The owners of the jute industry in Bengal likewise made subtle attempts to encroach upon the workers' wages. They reduced the total working hours in a week, sealed off 10 per cent of the looms and effected cut in workers' wages varying from one anna per rupee to 15 per cent of the total wages.

It is interesting to note that the jute mill owners planned and effected the economic onslaught on the labouring force when according to the study of the Dundee Jute Trade Union's delegation to India in 1925, the Indian jute industry earned an annual profit eight times the wages bill.

The railway workers too were not left out of this plan of attack. The State Railway Workshop Committee headed by Sir Vincent Raven which was appointed in 1926 recommended large-scale retrenchment of the railway workers in consequence of which 75,000 workers were threatened to be directly affected.

Serious discontent had already been brewing among the railway workers on the long-standing and unsettled problems, insufficiency of wages, rejection of the demand for minimum wages, refusal to recognize the unions and humiliation of the Indian workers by the European officers and several other similar issues. The retrograde recommendation of the Vincent Raven Committee further aggravated the situation.

This unbearable condition of the workers aggravated by the combined offensive of the native and foreign capitalists and further worsened by the colonial labour-policy of the imperialist government caused among the workers in various industries—cotton in Bombay, jute in Bengal, steel at Jamshedpur, railways and several others—a smouldering discontent which in no time blazed out in countrywide and massive strike struggles.

Unprecedented Working-Class Struggles :

The sweep and intensity of the countrywide working-class struggles which began in early 1927 and climaxed by 1928-29 had no parallel in the earlier history of Indian labour.

Compared to those of the previous year, although the strikes and the participant workers were less in number in the year 1927, the total number of working days lost was double that of the previous year. This indicates the protracted nature of the strikes occurring in 1927 and growing tenacity and cohesion of the Indian working class.

On a province-wise analysis of the strikes of the year 1927 it would be found that while 54 strikes occurred in Bombay, in Bengal there occurred a total of 34 strikes. But the labour-disputes of these two provinces were marked with certain distinctive traits. In Bombay a total of 128,078 workers participated in these strikes, while with participation of only half of this numerical strength—the total number of working days lost in Bengal amounted almost to three times that of Bombay. While in Bombay a total of 165,061 working days were lost, in Bengal the loss of working days was as high as 464,889. In Madras too, where 17,905 workers were involved in only 19 strikes, the loss of working days amounted to 187,441.

An industry-wise analysis of the strikes of that year indicates that 46.51 per cent of these strikes occurred in cotton textile industry only and involved the largest number of workers. Of the total number of working days lost, strikes in the railways alone claimed as large as 61.9 per cent. Only two protracted strikes in the Kharagpur Workshop of Bengal Nagpur Railway resulted in a loss of 880,218 working days.

The strikes assumed so serious proportions during 1928-29 that a total number of 3½ million working days were lost only in the year 1928.

This figure was higher than the total of the last five years. According to officially recorded statistics the number of strikes which occurred during this year in Bombay was 111 or 60 per cent of the total strikes, in Bengal it was 60, in Bihar and Orissa 8, in Madras 7 and in Punjab 2. Of the total of these countrywide strikes, 110 occurred in the cotton textile industry, 19 in jute, 11 in engineering, 9 on the railways and railway workshop and only one in the coal mining industry.

Strike of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway Workers at Kharagpur :

The strike-wave that developed in the year 1927 was specially marked by two protracted strikes of the workers of Bengal-Nagpur Railway at Kharagpur. Kharagpur is a large railway junction on the B. N. Railway and a big railway workshop is situated there. This railway centre is characterized by the concentration of a heterogeneous labour force belonging to a variety of racial and language groups. The pauperized peasants and agricultural workers who were engaged as industrial workers in the railways at Kharagpur became victims of inhuman repression and exploitation of the railway authorities. The ownership of this railway belonged to the private British capitalists, although 75 per cent of the total capital in this railway was invested by the Government of India.

The impact of the rising tide of the political and labour movements of this period moved and inspired the workers of Kharagpur also and they were locked in a sharp battle with the railway authorities against their policy of exploitation.

These bitter struggles of B. N. Railway workers were organized mainly against the scheme of retrenchment recommended by the State Railway Workshop Committee of Sir Vincent Raven, as the government planned to execute the suggested retrenchment first in that railway.

The Railway Board submitted a report to the Royal Commission on Labour in India giving an account of the strike, which was altogether misleading. The company justified the retrenchment on the ground of reorganization and introduction of improved workshop methods which according to them rendered surplus a substantial number of labour force. A good deal of information is, however, available from the defence statement of Mr. K. N. Joglekar, an accused in the Meerut Conspiracy case, 1929 and several other sources. Mr. Joglekar stated,⁹ 'The government's plans for rationalization and retrenchment were complete and they had decided to start retrenchment on the B. N. Railway. During the whole of 1926 stray dismissals were systematically being carried out and the workers were generally dissatisfied. The Bengal-Nagpur Railway Indian Union had been sending petitions after petitions to the Agent of the B. N. Railway and the Directors of the Company in England but to no avail. Finally the men began to grow impatient both with

the Union and with the railway authorities, and there arose a danger of the men taking action in spite of the union officials' counsels of patience.'

Sir David Petrie, the then Director of Intelligence Bureau noted,¹⁰ 'A serious strike had broken out in the Bengal-Nagpur Railway workshops at Kharagpur on February 11th, 1927 and it rapidly spread to other branches of the railway workers. The total number of strikers was about 26,000. The grievances of the workshop people included the dismissal of some workmen from the wagon shops, the dismissal of station committee chowkidars, the ejection of the people living in a village on railway land and the demolition of their houses, and lastly the alleged overbearing conduct of two European foremen. The main grievances alleged by the other employees were insecurity of service, insufficient wages and ill-treatment and harassment by the supervising staff. But the immediate cause of the strike was the issue of an order of transfer to W. V. R. Naidu, who was branch secretary of the B. N. Railway Indian Labour Union, Kharagpur and who instigated the men to go on strike.'

Mr. V. V. Giri was the president of B. N. Railway Indian Labour Union which was affiliated both to the All India Trade Union Congress and All India Railwaymen's Federation.

The two statements quoted above provide some useful information about the strike. It was quite possible that when the heaped-up and long-standing grievances of the workers were foreshadowing an imminent struggle, the transfer of the branch secretary of the union acted as a spark which set the fire. The strike began on February 11.

The government resorted to indiscriminate terror to break the strike. Railway Auxiliary Force was deployed against the strikers. And in the words of Mr. Joglekar,¹¹ 'whips, lathis, and buttends of the rifles were freely used and indiscriminate shooting was resorted to resulting in several workers being wounded and bayoneted. The authorities evidently wanted to suppress the strike and they not only used white terror but got the help of the District Magistrate to prohibit all meetings under Section 144 C.P.C. so as to stop all effective propaganda for the organization of the strike.'

Mr. V. V. Jogia, father of Mr. V. V. Giri raised an adjournment motion in the Central Legislative Assembly to discuss the

situation arising out of this strike and the terror let loose against it. According to the official statement given on the floor of the Assembly 15 workers received injuries in consequence of firing and charging bayonet. A statement issued from Treasury Bench during discussion of an adjournment motion tabled by Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy in the Bengal Legislative Council on February 23 also revealed that 10 workers were injured as a result of firing.¹² According to unofficial sources at least 40 workers received bullet and bayonet injuries.

Several meetings were organized by the B. N. Railway Labour Union at Kharagpur during and after the strike which were attended by Messrs. Mukunda Lal Sarkar, Aftab Ali, W. V. R. Naidu, V. V. Giri and Mrs. Santosh Kumari Gupta.

The strike received wide support from various trade unions and other sections of the people. Eminent personalities connected with the national movement also came forward in support of the strike.

The national press lent their unequivocal support to this strike. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Dainik Basumati*, *Forward*, *Samya*, *Muhammadi* and several other newspapers published from Calcutta highlighted and supported the strike.

A citizens' meeting was held at Albert Hall of Calcutta under the presidentship of Mr. J. N. Sengupta to express solidarity with the strikers. A Strike Relief Committee was also formed with Mr. J. M. Sengupta, Mr. Sarat Chandra Basu, Mr. Kishori Lal Ghosh, Mr. N. M. Joshi and several other men of eminence. Among the other notables who attended that meeting were Mr. Mrinal Kanti Basu, Dr. Sundari Mohan Das and Mr. Shapurji Saklatvala, M.P., a British Communist of Indian origin. While addressing the meeting, Mr. Saklatvala sharply condemned the imperialist government.

Bengal Trade Union Federation, G.I.P. Railway Workers' Union of Bombay, Tram Workers of Madras, Coalminers' Unions of Jharia and several other trade unions of the country extended moral support and financial assistance to the strikers.

Mr. Saklatvala, who was in India at the moment of the strike, visited Kharagpur to extend his support to the striking workers. But the government issued orders banning all public meetings at Kharagpur. Mr. Saklatvala addressed a letter to the Governor protesting against this attitude of the government. He

also strongly criticized the role of the management of Tata Iron and Steel Company who tried to come in aid of the railway authorities during the strike.

All India Trade Union Congress issued an appeal urging moral and financial support for the strikers. AITUC also approached the international trade union movement with an appeal for similar help. Mr. Mukunda Lal Sarkar sent telegrams to the General Council of Trade Union Congress, London and also to International Transport Workers' Federation at Amsterdam. Contents of these telegrams throw some light on the state of affairs existing on the eve of and during the strike.

The telegram sent to London during the strike stated:¹³ 'Inhuman treatment, assaults without provocation, dismantling quarters, summary dismissals, extortion of money for appointment, transfer, allotment of quarters, many other oppressions exasperated Bengal-Nagpur Railway Workers. Greatest discontent prevailing over entire system specially among twenty thousand workshop men at Kharagpur. Repeated representation, deputation by union yet bore no fruit, though simple demand for joint enquiry not granted . . . workers count upon international sympathy, support in their hard struggle forced on them by administration. Please extend your co-operation and give widest publicity. Save Indian railwaymen situation going beyond control shall advise further.'

The second telegram sent on the eve of the strike was similarly worded.

Heavy concentration of armed forces converted Kharagpur virtually into a battle ground. But in spite of terrifying repression, the workers held fast and the strike not only continued unabated but engulfed almost the entire B. N. Railway. The resoluteness of the workers and extensive popular support compelled the management to discuss the issue with the union. Representatives of the union negotiated with the Agent of the railway and on the assurances received from him the strike was withdrawn on 10 March 1927.

But events soon confirmed the falsity of the assurances given by the management. Within a short period the management again started preparations for executing their plan of retrenchment. Moreover, cynically disregarding their own assurances they dismissed a number of workers for participation in the

strike. This evoked tremendous indignation among the workers.

On 7 September 1927 the authorities issued notices of retrenchment upon 1,700 workers of Kharagpur workshop. In reply the workers in a body started a peaceful stay-in-strike within the workshop from the next day. This determined resistance continued till the Company declared lockout of the workshop on September 12.

One aspect of this course of events is, however, noteworthy. The leadership of B. N. Railway Labour Union displayed a lukewarm attitude on the eve of the first strike. But they had ultimately to yield to the irresistible pressure of the workers for a strike. But subsequently, the crass reformism and ambivalence of the leadership of the union remained no secret and in the second phase of this struggle, the contradiction that manifested between the growing class-consciousness and fighting attitude of the workers on the one hand and the constitutionalist and reformist mentality of the leadership on the other, did not remain as a transitory phenomenon, became on the contrary, more pronounced and assumed a full-fledged form in the subsequent phases of Indian trade union movement.

The leadership's denunciation of the workers' action of passive resistance in the shops publicly came out in a statement issued by the union on September 14, which said¹⁴: 'The Secretary of the Labour Union emphatically denies that the Labour leaders are approving and definitely encouraging the attitude of passive resistance offered by the workers of the shops. The step they took was entirely on their own responsibility. Mr. Giri, the president, as well as Mr. Naidu, the secretary of the Kharagpur Labour Union denounced it at a public meeting on 10th instant at Kharagpur.' It is further known from Mr. Joglekar's defence statement that;¹⁵ 'Mr. Naidu definitely stated that he was neither for a strike nor for any sort of passive resistance but he wanted to carry on the agitation by all constitutional means.' Moreover, what is strange that the union while accepting that 'on account of financial stringency of the company some retrenchment might be necessary', did not feel shy to state that 'if the procedure of gradual reduction was resorted to as suggested by the Union Deputation the object of the Company would have been gained.'¹⁶

An adjournment motion on the issue of this lockout and

retrenchment was raised and discussed in the Central Legislative Assembly. Both Mr. N. M. Joshi who was a member of the Assembly and Mr. V. V. Giri, president of the Labour Union nurtured the belief that this discussion in the Assembly would put pressure upon the government and the railway management. But it proved illusory.

Continuation of the lockout made the workers intensely wrathful and they rightly felt the necessity of extending the strike to the entire railway for defeating the atrocious tyranny of the management. But this was by no means a palatable proposition to the reformist leadership of the union. They could think of constitutional means only and so on the one hand while Mr. Giri and other leaders of the union bogged themselves in addressing series of meetings of the workers, Dewan Chaman Lal and several leaders of AITUC on the other, started sending appeals to the Railway authorities urging to stop retrenchment. But the authorities turned a deaf ear and stuck to their decision.

The young communists who actively stood by the first strike of the workers of B. N. Railway, this time also rushed to Kharagpur for joining the workers' struggle. Muzaffar Ahmad, S. A. Dange, Bhupendra Nath Dutt, Sibnath Banerjee, Dharani Goswami, Gopendra Nath Chakravarty, Singaravelu Chettiar and several other notable communist workers reached Kharagpur and plunged themselves into organizational activities in furtherance of the struggle.

This involvement was, in fact, one of the first schoolings received by the young communists in the matter of conducting militant working-class struggles.

The fraternal delegates of British Trade Union Congress Mr. Arthur Parcell and Mr. Joseph Halsworth, who attended the Kanpur session of the AITUC also came down to Kharagpur and stood by the struggling workers.

Discontent against the onslaught soon spread to the workers in other railways of the country. Apprehensive of an attack of retrenchment on them also, the workers in other railways eagerly looked forward for a victory to the struggle of the Kharagpur workers.

Indian National Congress too extended its support to this struggle. The requisition meeting of the All India Congress

Committee held in Calcutta on 28 October 1927 unanimously adopted a resolution moved by Mr. T. C. Goswami in support of the striking workers. The resolution stated;¹⁷ 'That the All India Congress Committee expresses deep sympathy with the Kharagpur strikers in their struggle against the grave injustice that had been done to a considerable section of the employees of the B. N. Railway and ask the whole country to stand by them and help them to vindicate their rights.'

A proposal for convening a joint convention of the representatives of the other railway workers' unions also came under active consideration with a view to extending the strike in other railways. A special conference of the All India Railwaymen's Federation was also held at Kharagpur on October 29 and 30, which decided by an overwhelming majority to prepare for a general strike on all the railways failing a settlement of the minimum demands of the B. N. Railway workers within the next week.

The unyielding resoluteness of the workers of Kharagpur to continue the strike indefinitely, apprehension of its extension on other railways and the unequivocal support and sympathy from various trade unions and political organizations that gathered behind this strike put effective pressure on the Government of India. The government announced the appointment of a committee consisting of two members, one from the Government of India and the other from the B. N. Railway to examine the grievances of the workers. But simultaneously the government pleaded their inability to intervene in the matter of retrenchment.

Mr. V. V. Giri and other leaders held discussion with the government demanding lifting of the lockout, reinstatement of the retrenched employees, payment of wages for the lockout period and representation of the union in the said committee. The government agreed to pay wages for the lockout period but refused to reinstate the 1,700 retrenched workers.

The Union called off the strike on 8 December 1927.

The first strike at Kharagpur was developed by the workers to repel the onslaught of retrenchment, but the second one was actually imposed upon them by the management by way of declaring a lockout. Nevertheless, the spirit of unity, courage and dogged determination which the workers of Kharagpur dis-

played in their struggle of resistance against the combined and vindictive offensive of the management and the government were, in a word, unprecedented. Not only to continue the strike, but to think of extending it and involving more and more workers was also a definite manifestation of the growing class-consciousness of the workers. Both these strikes of the B. N. Railway workers and the working-class solidarity that these strikes enjoyed were indicative of the fact that bidding farewell to the earlier period of scattered and unplanned strikes, the working class of India had reached the stage of class-conscious and cohesive struggles.

East India Railway Workers' Strike at Liluah :

Fresh with the experience of Kharagpur railway workers' strike, the young communists then devoted themselves to brisk trade union activities among the East India Railway Workers at Liluah in the vicinity of Calcutta. Similar organizational work began in different other railways also during this period.

Mr. Kiran Chandra Mitra, a leader of the railway workers was then engaged in trade union work among the workers at Lucknow and Danapore. He then came down to Liluah and engaged himself in the task of organizing the workers of the Railway workshop at Liluah.

Dewan Chaman Lall wrote¹⁸ that during this time the workers had to pay a bribe of Rs. 30 to Rs. 40 for securing a job. Even for securing a pass for the workshop an amount of Rs. 3 to Rs. 5 had to be paid. And one yearly increment of wages cost not less than Rs. 5 to Rs. 10.

In January 1928 the workers of some departments of the workshop submitted a memorandum to the authorities demanding wage-rise, leave liberalization and several other facilities. While the workers had been agitating for settlement of these demands, two union activists were dismissed from service by the management. This aggrieved the workers highly and in a general meeting held on February 29, the workers demanded (1) a minimum wage of Rs. 30 for the unskilled workers, (2) 25 per cent increase of wages for the skilled workers and (3) reinstatement of the two dismissed workers.

But the management responded by dismissing another batch of four workers. Deeply shocked, the workers on March

5 entered the workshop but refused to work till the reinstatement of the dismissed colleagues. The following day, four of them were taken back, but the workers persisted in their stay-in-strike demanding reinstatement of all the dismissed men. On March 8 the Company declared a lockout of the workshop whence began the protracted struggle of the workers.

While the negotiations held for ending this deadlock failed, the Company on March 20 announced a plan for retrenchment. This added fuel to the fire and instantaneously the strike spread out to Howrah General Stores, Howrah Block Signal Shop, Carriage department and the workshop at Bamungachhi.

The communists attached to the Workers' and Peasants' Party took an active part in organizing this strike. While the communists and the workers in general were inclined to extend this strike, Mr. Kiran Chandra Mitra was keen to anyhow secure an early settlement. But the adamant attitude of the management ultimately forced him not only to continue the strike, but to further extend it to Asansol and Jamalpur areas besides Howrah.

Simultaneous with extension of the strike, on March 28, a big mass of ten thousand workers demonstrated before the Headquarters of the E.I. Railway at Calcutta. Messrs. Kiran Chandra Mitra, Sibnath Banerjee and other leaders met the Agent but to no effect. But when the agitated workers had been returning home, all on a sudden, the police fired upon them near Bamungachhi Loco shed killing two workers and injuring many.¹⁹

This killing further worsened the situation and the strike so spread out that it completely paralyzed even the Amta-Howrah Light Railway. The workers of Burn, Martin and Bird companies too joined in a sympathetic strike. A public meeting held at Calcutta strongly condemned the killing and expressed sympathy with the strikers. While addressing the gathering Mr. Kiran Chandra Mitra appealed to the members of the public to come forward in support of the strike. Mr. Phillip Spratt, a British communist was among the notable participants of the meeting.

Public meetings and demonstrations in support of the strike were held in many places of Calcutta and also at Burdwan and other centres.

At such a juncture, the leaders of the national movement also came forward and exhibited their keenness for a settlement of the strike. But the negotiation held for the purpose by Rev. C. F. Andrews, Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose and other leaders met failure.

From the very beginning, the communists had been pressing for extending the strike on the entire railway, but Mr. Kiran Chandra Mitra did not favour that proposition on the plea of public inconvenience. But the unbending attitude of the authorities ultimately forced the union to think in terms of extending the strike. Publicity of this intention of the union deeply concerned the management and they lifted lockout of the Liluah workshop on May 25. But the workers started a passive resistance within the workshop premises demanding settlement of the grievances.

The union, meanwhile, called for a strike on the entire railway. In consequence Ondal workshop, Asansol Loco store and several other centres became seriously affected and more than 16,000 workers were involved. But the authorities did not show any sign of relenting, on the contrary tried to break the strike through sheer use of force. The workers on the other side, hard-pressed by prolonged suffering and semi-starvation, felt exhausted. Many of the workers in other industries who had started a sympathetic strike also returned to work. The situation thus becoming totally unfavourable, the union was left with no alternative but to call off the strike. On July 9, the strike was called off unconditionally.

The imperialist government let loose a merciless terror to break the protracted and heroic strike. Simultaneously, the imperialist press also launched a slander campaign against the communists and funnily they did not hesitate even to discover the hands of Moscow behind the strike.

The nationalist press, however, supported the strike and *Ananda Bazar Patrika* even went to the extent of condemning the indifferent attitude of the National Congress in this regard.²⁰

This protracted strike of the E.I. Railway workers served as a valuable political lesson to the working class of the country. The workers engaged in a trade union struggle on economic demands discovered to their utter dismay how the imperialist State-machinery could openly come out to smash a simple

economic struggle by merciless and tyrannical application of its armed forces. This discovery contributed to the development of an anti-imperialist and political consciousness among the workers and they began coming round the realization that their struggle for economic demands and the struggle against imperialism were actually interlinked and inseparable. This strike might be considered unsuccessful from the viewpoint of demands, but politically judged, it was a doubtless success.

Strike on the South Indian Railway :

Next followed the strike of the South Indian Railway workers on 20 July 1928. This strike though lasted only for 10 days, its importance could not, however, be altogether ignored by the imperialist government.

The main two issues which sparked off this strike were the scheme of retrenchment in terms of Vincent Raven Committee's recommendation and shifting of the railway workshop to Golden Rock with concomitant transfer of the workers. The demand for wage-rise was also a issue, though not the main.

After announcing the decision in April 1928 to retrench 3,000 workers, the management at first tried to persuade the workers for a voluntary retirement failing which the company set determined to retrench the workers, particularly the less competents among them by a show of trade test.

Against this offensive of the company, the workers started organizing themselves and amalgamating the various local unions, one central union for the entire railway was formed. Men like Mr. B. Shiva Rao, Mr. Munkunda Lal Sarkar and Mr. Singaravelu Chettiar with varying political and social outlook were in the leadership. Mr. Sarkar and Mr. Chettiar were closer to the communists in regard to outlook and methods of working-class struggle.

In order to violently put down this ten-day long strike, the government deployed armed troops and as a result of firing several striking workers were either killed or injured. With splendid heroism the workers built up stiff resistance against these barbarities. Many workers were arrested but this could not cow them down ; on the contrary thousands of workers took out demonstrations in Madras and other places condemning the atrocities and demanding release of the arrested comrades.

This awakening among the workers and their organized demonstration set the government panicky and in a further bid to demoralize the fighting workers they put under arrest both Mr. Singaravelu Chettiar and Mr. Munkunda Lal Sarkar. Subsequently Mr. V. Krishnaswami Pillai, president of the union and Mr. Narayanaswami, secretary of the strike committee were also detained.

This chain of repressive actions climaxing in imprisonment of the leaders soon adversely reacted upon the workers. They lost much of their defiant spirit. The union in this condition was left with no alternative but to call off the strike on July 30.

After withdrawal of the strike, many workers including Mr. Munkunda Lal Sarkar and Mr. Singaravelu Chettiar were sentenced to imprisonment in terms of the provisions of the Indian Railway Act. With a free hand, the company then executed their scheme of retrenchment and the demand of wage-rise too they cynically ignored.

This strike again laid bare to the workers the repressive and exacting character of the imperialist government. Taking lesson from the outcome of the strike they further 'saw that the isolated fights were more often than not unsuccessful. And they therefore decided to build united front of All India Railwaymen and give final battle on the issue of retrenchment which had become a common danger to All India Railwaymen'.²¹

Strike on the G.I.P. Railway :

A powerful union of the workers of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway developed at the initiative of the communists and the strike that commenced on this railway on 4 February 1930 was guided by this Union.

The demand of the workers were mainly : Increase of wages, stopping dismissal and other measures of victimization, stopping arbitrary transfer of the union workers, and stopping retrenchment. The union demanded also reduction of the long working hours, abolition of racial discrimination and settlement of such other problems.

Monthly wage-rate of more than 33,000 workers of that railway was much lower than Rs. 15. A considerable number of workers earned such meagre wages as varying between Rs. 8 and Rs. 9. More than 17,000 workers of this railway were paid

monthly wages less than Rs. 30. For an improvement of this miserable condition of wages the union demanded a general wage-rise of 10 per cent and fixing minimum wages at Rs. 30 per month.

The strike which spread out to the entire railway received wide response from the workers. But the railway authorities, as in other cases, let loose a reign of terror to break the strike. Through use of police and military the workers were forced out of their quarters, water-supply was stopped to the railway colonies and a large number of workers were arrested. The management also sought to replace the strikers by new recruits.

Popular support to this strike was widely forthcoming. But the determination and militancy with which the union had been conducting the strike were not much to the liking of some people. Particularly the leadership of another union which existed on that railway was not in favour of this strike. In such a condition many proposed arbitration on the demands of the workers. A deputation on behalf of the All India Railwaymen's Federation held negotiation with Mr. George Rainy, the official in charge of the Railway Board. The concessions which the Railway Board agreed to offer were: No victimization for participation in the strike, early revision of wages of the low-paid workers, recognition to the union and reinstatement of Mr. D. B. Kulkarni, the vice-president of the union on his being declared fit by medical examination. But the Board refused to reinstate another worker of the union Mr. V. B. Purandar. In term of this agreement Mr. V. V. Giri, Mr. Chaman Lall and Mr. N. M. Joshi called upon the workers to resume work on March 15.

This settlement was not agreeable to Mr. R. S. Ruikar, president of the union and other leading members particularly the communists, although ultimately they also accepted the decision to call off the strike.

But after the withdrawal of the strike, the management announced their decision for a reduction of 1,500 to 2,000 men at Matunga workshop. A plan of retrenchment at Jhansi and other places was announced. This made the workers intensely wrathful. The Strike Committee which met at Bombay on March 24 decided to offer peaceful *Satyagraha* and picketing at different centres till withdrawal of the decision of retrenchment.

The *Satyagraha* was to commence on April 10. But mean-

while the news of the failure of Mr. Ginwalla's attempt for a settlement of the dispute enraged the workers and on April 4, the workers organized a huge meeting, took out massive procession and angrily demonstrated.

'After the meeting', Mr. Joglekar stated, 'they went to Victoria Terminus with a view to take a train to return to their homes. But the railway authorities called in the police to attack the workers. The workers insisted on travelling back by train. Whereupon the police attack started and a regular lathi-charge and firing were resorted to. Two strikers were killed and more than 50 strikers were injured and wounded in the lathi charge and firing.'

The series of events that followed as related by Mr. Joglekar: 'The workers were infuriated by the death of two of their comrades, and they were pressing for an immediate action. Without waiting for the order of the strike committee or of the leaders they took action and offered *Satyagraha* at Kurla. They stopped train between Sion and Kurla and the police again opened fire on *Satyagrahi* workers.'²²

Many of the workers who offered *Satyagraha* in various centres of the railway were put behind the bars. Mr. R. S. Ruikar, president of the union was also thrown into the jail for addressing a meeting violating prohibitory orders.

The Executive Committee of the union which met at Bombay on April 15, in the midst of this all-out attack, finally decided to call off the strike.

This strike that ended was a highly organized and disciplined action on the part of the workers. This was a major strike of this period joined by a little more than 22,600 workers. The organized functioning of the union and the strike committee and active presence of the communists lent remarkable speed and militancy to this strike.

Strike on the N.G.S. Railway (Hyderabad) :

The workers of Lalgudha workshop of the Nizam Guaranteed State Railway struck work in September 1930 demanding recognition of the newly formed union and settlement of other demands.²³ Mr. V. V. Giri, general secretary of the AIRF held negotiations with the railway authorities on the demands of the workers and on acceptance of the demand of recognition of the

union and settlement of certain other problems by the authorities the men resumed work.

Dispute on B.B. and C.I. Railway :

In 1929 the management of the Bombay Baroda and Central India Railway announced their decision to shift the Parel Workshop of the railway to Dohad, a place 300 miles away and a cut of 1/11th of the wages of the workers whose transfer would follow this shifting of workshop. Union opposed this declaration of the Company and countered the decision of wage-cut by putting forward a demand of 20 per cent increase of wage. An Arbitration Board was appointed under the chairmanship of Mr. B. B. Ghosh and the Board on hearing the two parties opined against wage-cut. The award being accepted by both the parties, the dispute was settled amicably and no need of a strike arose.²⁴

The militant strike actions on the Indian railways during 1927-30 gave a new direction to the Indian trade union movement. The general strikes that occurred in the jute and textile industries and the strike in the steel industries of Jamshedpur and other struggles that followed during the same period raised the trade union movement of India to a challenging height.

Textile Workers' Strike—First General Strike 1928 :

Two successive general strikes of the Bombay cotton textile workers which occurred in 1928 and 1929 were of immense significance in the history of Indian working-class movement. These strikes though occurred in a single industry of a single city exerted a countrywide influence and radiated far-reaching effect.

The scheme of rationalization contrived by the cotton mill-owners of Bombay appeared as an imminent danger of retrenchment in all the mills and though in an isolated manner, the workers had been fighting against this danger in different mills since as back as 1926. The year 1928 saw the mighty combination of these isolated struggles and its great surge ahead. Significantly, the communists were in the forefront and they led it. The first strike commenced on 26 April 1928 and lasted for about six months.

The scheme of rationalization having been implemented in

some of the mills, the aggrieved workers thought of organizing a general strike in all the mills. But the leadership of Bombay Textile Labour Union and Girni Kamgar Mahamandal opposed this contemplation of a general strike, which, however came out as a reality under the impact of subsequent events.

On April 15, huge demonstration of the textile workers was organized at Bombay under the joint auspices of Bombay Mill Workers' Union and Workers' and Peasants' Party. Meanwhile, by April 16, the owners closed down a number of mills and not less than 20,000 workers were affected by this closure. The same evening while addressing a meeting of the workers the communists of Bombay re-emphasized the necessity of organizing a general strike in all the mills to repel this onslaught.

Bombay Textile Labour Union, led by Mr. N. M. Joshi was opposed to general strike, although by then the struggle had spread over to all the mills. The owners also on their turn started closing down the mills. To counter this situation, the communists immediately plunged into the task of organizing a general strike, which, actually commenced on April 26.

Initially two strike committees were formed—one by the militant section and the other by the Bombay Textile Labour Union. Subsequently on May 2, the two committees were amalgamated into one Joint Strike Committee. On May 3, the Joint Strike Committee, drew up a 17-point charter of demands of the workers. Most important among the demands incorporated in the charter were: To stop wage-cut and restoration of the reduction of wages effected since 1925, to stop raising daily working hours, to stop altering the existing service condition to the disadvantage of the workers, to increase wages of those whose monthly wages are below Rs. 30, consolidation of high price allowance with the original wages and no victimization of men for taking part in union activities.

The Mill-Owners' Association rejected most of these demands and simultaneously announced certain terms on which they were prepared to reopen the mills. But the said terms were not acceptable to the Joint Strike Committee and it directed the workers to continue the strike.

Mr. N. M. Joshi who had ultimately to accept the strike, appealed to the government for appointment of an Arbitration Board to settle the disputes. Feeling the weight of the strike

and in an anxiety to bring an early end to it the government showed its readiness to consider the proposal. But the proposal could not materialize on account of disagreement between the two parties on the terms of reference.

A series of efforts followed for settlement of the strike. Joint sittings were held between the Mill-Owners' Association and the Strike Committee successively for two days on August 15 and 16, but that too in vain. A protracted negotiation took place in the month of September between the negotiating committee of the Joint Strike Committee and a sub-committee of the Mill-Owners' Association. Though the two parties, in course of that discussion, reached broad agreement on other problems, the Mill-Owners' Association did not agree to rescind the decision of wage-reduction of the weavers, and so it failed. Then the government convened a joint sitting of the mill-owners and the Strike Committee on October 4. It was decided in that meeting that the government would appoint a Committee of Enquiry to examine the grievances of the workers and that decision was ratified by both the parties.

Later this decision along with decision to call off the strike was approved by the workers in a meeting held on October 5 and accordingly the men resumed work on October 6.

Although the meeting of October 5 decided to withdraw the strike, several leaders cautioned the workers that the settlement was in the nature of a temporary truce. They were openly doubtful about the efficacy of the Committee and so they urged the workers to build up a comprehensive organization and raise large funds within the next six months in order to secure increase of wages and improvement of service condition, if needed by another protracted strike.

This general strike, which generated an ardent enthusiasm and a spirit of unity among the workers, gave birth to the Girni Kamgar Union, the most militant organization of the Bombay textile workers. There was no effective organization of the workers on the eve of the strike. The two unions, Girni Kamgar Mahamandal led by Mr. Arjun Atmaram Alve and Bombay Textile Labour Union led by Mr. N. M. Joshi, existed by names only and had little influence upon the workers. A few weeks before the strike, another organization—Bombay Mill Workers' Union—was also formed under the leadership of Mr. Jhabwala.

Initially the communists worked within Girni Kamgar Mahamandal and also within this newly formed union. But with rapid expansion of the workers' struggle and with its growing militancy, the utter ineffectiveness of these two organizations manifestly came out.

So the necessity of a perfect organization capable of leading and developing these struggles was acutely felt. The process, however, started. In the words of Mr. K. N. Joglekar,²⁵ 'It was only during the process of the strike that the Textile Workers evolved and perfected their organization, firstly, in the form of a strike committee called the Joint Strike Committee, in which under pressure of the rank and file the moderates or the reformist section was compelled to join. And when the strike was over it was through the experiences of the strike that the workers realized the importance and significance of their class organization, and it was as a result of the experience of the strike days that they raised within the space of the next month one of the mightiest unions, the Girni Kamgar Union.'

Thus Girni Kamgar Union was an off-spring of the strike. It was founded on 22 May 1928.²⁶ Initially starting with a membership of only 324 it grew by leaps and bounds and the membership had reached 54,000 by December 1928 and 65,000 by the first quarter of 1929.²⁷ Subsequently the words 'Red Flag' or 'Lal Bawta' qualified the name of this Union and it became Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag), the only effective union of the Bombay textile workers led by the communists.

A correct appraisal of the workers' attitude towards rationalization and determination of a correct line of action to counter it, were the attributes which enabled the communists to rise to the leadership of this struggle. The communists perfectly realized the import of rationalization and they wanted to beat off this menace by widening the struggle. This correct line of action of the communists combined with their sincerity, devotion and sense of discipline highly impressed the workers.

In terms of the agreement on October 13, the government appointed a Committee presided over by Justice Fawcett. The report of the Committee came out in March 1929 but without any economic concession to the workers. This six-month-long strike cost the workers 25 million rupees in wages. Moreover, the scheme of rationalization against which the workers fought

was not abandoned, it was only temporarily suspended.

The strike brought no economic success, but it succeeded in enabling the workers to understand their own strength and to build up their fighting class organization. The Government of India closely studied the character of the strike and in the words of their spokesman ;²⁸ 'In several respects the strike itself had been remarkable. It was unprecedented in the length of time for which it lasted and in the discipline and cohesion of the strikers.'

Second General Strike 1929 :

The Second general strike of the textile workers of Bombay commenced on 26 April 1929 hardly after a lapse of six months from the first strike of 1928. About 100,000 workers of 32 mills joined this strike. This strike lasted for 29 days resulting in a loss of 8 million working days.

While the first general strike took place against the onslaught of rationalization, the second occurred against the owners' policy of repression. The dispute originated in the Spring Mills in the month of March from the incident of dismissal of a worker. Girni Kargar Union demanded reinstatement of the dismissed worker, which on being turned down by the owners, the union called for a strike in that mill.

This dismissal and rampant other dismissals in several mills intensely irritated the workers. To Girni Kamgar union this chain of dismissals was no insignificant or routine affair, rather the union found in it a plan of systematic attack upon the workers. Meanwhile a meeting between the Mill-Owners' Association and the Joint Strike Committee was scheduled to be held on April 24 to consider the issues connected with implementation of the Fawcett Committee Report. But the union refused to take part in that meeting until the owners changed their policy of victimizing the union activists. The owners, however, denied any policy of victimization being followed by them, rather tried to justify the dismissals as done purely on disciplinary grounds. About 6,000 workers were so dismissed. New hands were also recruited to replace them. The demand for reinstatement of the 6,000 workers being adamantly rejected by the owners, the union called for a general strike in the textile industry of Bombay and accordingly 75,000 workers of 41 mills began the

strike on April 26. By May 1 the strike spread to 64 mills affecting about 110,000 workers.²⁹

The government made elaborate police arrangement to break the strike at the very beginning of it. The police resorted to indiscriminate lathi-charge and firing upon the workers killing or injuring a large number of them. Prohibitory orders were issued against holding of meetings and demonstrations and large-scale arrests were made. These police atrocities tremendously infuriated the workers. When two of their leaders Mr. S. V. Deshpande and Mr. B. T. Ranadive were arrested they angrily demonstrated against their arrest, whereupon the police fired upon them.³⁰

These two office-bearers of the union were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for a term of six weeks and to a fine of Rs. 200 each on the charges of organizing unlawful assembly.³¹ Besides, a large number of volunteers of the union were also arrested on charges of violence.

The six-month long strike which had occurred barely six months ahead, already fatigued the workers enormously, now the terrible police repression let loose upon them during the second strike combined with the adamant attitude of the owners severely strained the morale of the workers. And failing to keep up their morale, some groups of workers joined work in certain mills.

The government, meanwhile, decided to refer the dispute to a Court of Inquiry presided over by Mr. Justice H. G. Pearson, a Judge of the Calcutta High Court. On September 18, the Court published its report, which obviously did not come in favour of the workers.

The Girni Kamgar Union, after taking into consideration the latest condition of the strike and the morale of the workers, called off the strike on September 19. In the resolution calling upon the workers to end the strike the union stated: ³²

‘The Union and its members have done their best to fight for their right which are also the rights of the working class in general, but the strain on their resources has been so heavy that it is not possible for some time to continue the campaign of persuading the workers to remain on strike and hence it has become regretfully necessary to withdraw the union pickets from the mills from Thursday, September 19; this does not mean,

however, that the union accepts the report of the Court of Inquiry either partially or entirely, or that this union gives up any of its demands.'

Condemning the Report of the Inquiry Committee as a contrivance for launching sinister campaign to discredit the Girni Kamgar Union and smashing it, the resolution emphatically stated:

'... the textile workers of Bombay, organized under the Red Flag will fight to the last for their organized existence and for their legitimate rights; and they hope to be helped by all sections of the working class in this fight, so that they will emerge victorious in the end.'

The strike being withdrawn, the mill-owners in delightful vindictiveness unleashed repression upon the union workers taking the plea of discipline. Dismissals and other punitive measures followed. Side by side various legitimate demands of the workers were ignored and what was more in many cases their wages were reduced.

Jute Workers' Strike 1928-29:

In July 1929, a general strike occurred in the jute mills of Calcutta and its vicinity. This was the first general strike of the workers in jute industry of Bengal.

The jute industry of Bengal was a mine of invaluable wealth which while ceaselessly brought immense fortunes to the treasure-houses of the blessed British capitalists, condemned the poor workers to a state of untold misery. Forced to inhabit in dirty dingy slums and to work for abnormally long hours for the barest pittance, these jute mill workers of Bengal were made hapless victims to the insatiable thirst of the European capitalist exploiters. Frequent infliction of corporal punishment on the workers was reminiscent of the barbarities of the medieval age.

The jute workers, of course, did never bend down to reconcile with their lot. On the contrary, occasion after occasion they rose up in resistance. But so long these were unconnected struggles in isolated mills which did not take the form of a united resistance through a general strike in the entire industry. But such a united action was an impending necessity for the jute workers' sur-

vival. Pointing this out, *Ganabani*, a Bengali weekly published from Calcutta wrote:³³ 'In most of the jute mills, *Zulum* is committed upon them, and all mill-owners suck out their heart's blood. Hence, the labourers of all jute mills will have to combine and offer fight at one time and in all places. Otherwise, victory will never be theirs. The number of labourers who work in the jute mills of Bengal is 340,000, and they will be able to get something only when they unite and rise up in a body at one and the same time against the owners. A strike here today, another there tomorrow will hardly be of much profit. It is only when the labourers will combine and bring to standstill the jute mills of Bengal that they will be greeted with shouts of triumphs from all sides.'

Thus forecast *Ganabani*, and it was not in vain. The trade union workers as well as the mass of jute workers also came to realize through their past experience, that to resist the greedy owners' limitless exploitation a general strike in the jute industry would be the only effective course.

The jute workers of Bengal were in a chronic state of unrest especially in the decade under review. The following table is a record of their ascendant struggles paving the way for the general strike of July 1929.

Strike in Jute Mills³⁴

Year	Number of Strikes	Number of Men involved	Number of Working days lost
1921	... 39	186,479	706,229
1922	... 40	173,957	1,079,627
1923	... 29	90,664	644,804
1924	... 18	69,488	346,756
1925	... 14	44,940	242,906
1926	... 29	38,042	794,384
1927	... 9	34,900	218,000
1928	... 18	56,524	1,508,708
1929	... 5	18,285	106,785
(Up to June)			
	201	113,279	5,648,199

The main and the immediate reason for this much-longed-for struggle which occurred in July 1929 was an announcement of the Indian Jute Mills Association increasing weekly working

hours from 54 to 65. This announcement was put to effect on 1 July 1929. And the general strike which came in its wake was aimed to defeat this intensification of exploitation by increasing working hours.

But in the year preceding the general strike of July 1929 two remarkable struggles occurred in the Laddow Jute Mill of Chengail and Fort Gloster Mill of Bauria. Both Chengail and Bauria were two villages on the western bank of the river Hooghly and only a few miles away from Calcutta. In March 1928 a sudden and brief strike occurred in the former mill which ended unsuccessfully and resulted in the dismissal of some workers. Discontent was seething among the 10,000 workers of that mill in course of which some of them contacted Bengal Trade Union Federation at Calcutta for forming a Union. Laddow Jute Mill Workers' Union was thus formed with Mr. Bankim Mukherjee as its first secretary. This irritated the management and Mr. Washington, the manager of the American Company started putting the workers into all sorts of inconveniences. On 23 April 1928, 10,000 workers of the mill plunged into a strike which continued for 17 days. On May 10 the workers resumed work. The strike achieved nothing tangible and so the workers participated in another short-lived strike within a few days of the previous strike.³⁵

The birth of a union at Chengail came out as a danger signal to the Fort Gloster Company. They were firmly determined not to allow any union in their mill. Despite company's resistance and sometimes violence upon the workers, Bauria Chatkal Majdoor Union was ultimately formed on 15 July 1928. For forming the union a general meeting of the workers was called on that day in the lawn adjacent to the Mill. This lawn belonged to the company and they did not allow to hold the meeting there. Yet it was held on the road and the union was formed.³⁶

On July 16 the workers came out on strike and thus began the most protracted strike in the industry before the general strike of 1929. On the first day of the strike, the police and the company's hired scabs made violent attack on the striking workers.

As a result of police firing 28 workers were injured. Five of them were in a precarious condition. Yet the workers continued the strike.

The company refused to come to any terms and they decided to wear out the workers in this prolonged resistance and teach them a lesson.

But the workers remaining firm and undaunted, the company conspired to bring in blacklegs. It was reported that the company spent few thousand rupees for the purpose and ultimately a good number of unemployed people were managed to be brought into the mill through back-door. This was a fatal blow to the exhausted workers who failed to offer any further resistance. After long six months of heroic resistance, the strike of Fort Gloster Mill collapsed on 16 January 1929.

The barbarous repression on the strike drew the entire country's attention to it. Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru came down to Bauria and issued an appeal to the public for generous help to the striking workers. In his appeal Mr. Nehru said that the struggle was not merely a local one rather, it affected the whole area and the entire trade union movement of India.

Though unsuccessful in regard to achievement of demands, the strike at Bauria was a unique example of heroic resistance put up by a section of the Indian working class. Muzaffar Ahmad said,³⁷ 'There is no precedent of conducting such a protracted struggle of the jute workers. Not only during those days, even today the jute workers have not been able to create such a history.'

Among the non-worker leaders of the strike, mention may be made of Messrs. Radharaman Mitra, Bankim Mukherjee,³⁸ Phillip Spratt and Gopen Chakravarty. Mr. Spratt was a British communist who later left the party. Mr. Bankim Mukherjee and Mr. Gopen Chakravarty joined the Communist Party of India.

First General Strike in July 1929 :

As already noted the General Strike of the jute workers took place against further lengthening of working hours. 'At the first instance attempt was made to introduce 60 hours work by issuing notice, with it 60 thousand workers were retrenched by replacing the system of two-shift work by a system of one-shift and then work-load too was increased in addition to enhancement of working hours.'³⁹

The workers instantaneously started resisting this offensive of the mill-owners. By the first week of July a number of mills

were affected by the workers' resistance. Workers in several mills came out on strike. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*⁴⁰ reported, 'As a result of the change of working hours and days in the jute industry from 55 hours of five days to 60 hours of six days adopted from July 1, the weavers of the Alliance Jute Mill (Mg. Agents M/S Begg Dunlop and Co.) and Meghna Jute Mills (Mg. Agents M/S Machinon Mackenzie & Co.) and the spinners of Baranagar Jute Mill (Mg. Agents M/S George Henderson & Co.) struck work on the question of increase of bonus and overtime allowances from Saturday, July 6. The total strength of workmen of these mills is approximately about 30,000 to 40,000. In consequence of the weavers' and spinners' strike the work of these mills has been dislocated.'

So the strike began and progressed, but as yet it did not assume the character of a general strike. By July 20, the workers in almost all the mills refused to work more than 54 hours a week. By August 5 the strike became general affecting almost all the mills of Calcutta and on both sides of the river Hooghly within a radius of about 20 miles from Calcutta.

The strike was led by the Bengal Jute Worker's Union (formerly Bengal Jute Workers' Association) which was not registered under Indian Trade Union Act but had larger following than another older and registered organization, Kankinara Labour Union. Notable among the leaders of this strike were Miss Prohabati Das Gupta, Messrs. Bankim Mukherjee, Kali Sen, Abdul Momin, Abdul Halim and Abdur Rezzak Khan.⁴¹ The communists worked within this Bengal Jute Workers' Union and came in prominence in the process of the strike.

During the strike the following demands were formulated by the union.

1. Proportionate increase in total earnings for extra time worked.
2. No victimization.
3. Payment of the wages for the period during which the workers had been on strike or had been locked out.
4. The creation of a board to consider other grievances, the board to consist of three mill-owners, three representatives of the Bengal Jute Workers' Union and two outsiders (one to be chosen by the employers and the other by union.)

5. Provision of maternity benefit.

6. No corporal punishment.

These demands were submitted to the mill-owners and publicized among the workers and the public.

But any negotiation on the demands being not in sight thanks to the adamant attitude of the mill-owners, the strike turned out to be a protracted one. Police repression was unleashed against the striking workers and many of them including some of their leaders were arrested.

People of Bengal came out in support of the strike. A meeting of the citizens of Calcutta held on August 10 under the presidentship of Mr. J. M. Sengupta appealed to the people for extending financial assistance to the strikers.

Steadfastness of the strikers ultimately compelled the mill-owners to come forward for a settlement of the disputes. Negotiations were held between the representatives of the union and the Indian Jute Mills Association and a settlement was arrived at on the following terms:⁴²

- 1(a) Owners will restore 54 hours' work a week and withdraw the notice for 60 hours' work.
- (b) Double wages for overtime work will be paid.
- (c) Food allowance will be paid as before.
- (d) The question of reintroducing the rate of bonus paid for 54 hours' work prior to July 1 will be considered.
2. One-shift will not be introduced for the present.
- 3(a) No corporal punishment will be inflicted.
- (b) The mates and sirdars will be punished for taking bribe.
4. Accommodation of the workers will be improved and arrangement will be made for light and water supply and drainage system will be improved.
5. Maternity facilities for the women workers will be considered.
6. The owners will not object to formation of union and in each mill the management will sympathetically consider grievances of the workers.
7. Nobody will be dismissed from service for joining the strike.

This agreement was signed on August 18 and work was resumed in all the mills on the following day although a little

confusion prevailed among the workers.

On behalf of the union the negotiation was conducted by some non-communist leaders. The communists were of the opinion that but for this hasty settlement some more concessions could have been secured.

This first general strike of the jute workers of Bengal was a significant success not only in respect of settlement of grievances of the workers but also in respect of achievement of a greater consolidation of the working class. This heroic struggle of the workers of a mixed composition in respect of religion, race, and language was a remarkable event in Indian trade union movement.

Strike in Tata Iron and Steel Works 1928 :

A protracted strike of 18,000 workers of Tata Iron and Steel Works commenced on 18 April 1928 and lasted till the middle of September of that year. The manner of settlement of the strike of 1922 could not mitigate the discontent of the workers, rather it started growing with the passage of time. The smouldering discontent ultimately burst into a long drawn-out strike in 1928.

The reformist leadership of the Labour Association tried to pacify the workers and with that purpose in 1925 Rev. C. F. Andrews, president of the union invited Gandhiji to Jamshedpur for holding discussion with the management. Gandhiji came to an agreement with the management which could not, however, satisfy the workers.

In this connection some events of the past having important bearing upon the existing developments need be mentioned before going into the details of the strike of 1928.

The attitude of the management of Tata Iron and Steel Works towards the problems of the labour and their union has already been discussed in connection with the previous strikes. Despite a settlement in 1924, the problems of the workers of this large steel plant continued to be aggravated thanks to the senselessly greedy and anti-labour policy of the management. The growing unrest among the badly exploited labourers necessitated Gandhiji's visit at Jamshedpur so that his gracious personality could prevail upon the management to be more reasonable and humane in their treatment towards the labour. That

even Gandhiji's personal intervention ultimately failed to exercise any mellowing effect on, not to speak of changing the iron hearts of those foremost Indian capitalists, was proved in no time and that was why the workers had again to launch a tortuous and protracted struggle to get some minimum concessions conceded by the management.

Anyway, while at Jamshedpur to talk to the employers as a representative of the workers, Gandhiji was felicitated by the employers in a grand reception arranged for him. In that reception the Tatas presented to Gandhiji a steel casket with a purse.

The incongruity associated with this event was obvious. In 1927 Mr. Shapurji Saklatvala wrote a letter to Gandhiji criticizing his performance in accepting presentation from the Tatas. In his long letter he wrote,⁴³ 'I remember in London we all read the description of your royal reception at Jamshedpur and your acceptance of an address in steel casket with a purse, as if in that Jamshedpur under-feeding, bad-housing, underclothing do not go on, as if deaths which are preventable under modern scientific principles are not daily taking place, as if men were never driven to resort to strike through unreasonable obstinacy of their employers and as if even military operations against workers have not taken place. I have confessed above that I have looked at this picture of your performance with disappointment from a long distance.'

How Gandhiji countered this diatribe is quite significant. To Mr. Saklatvala he wrote,⁴⁴ 'My communist comrade finds fault with my work among the labourers in Jamshedpur because I accepted the address in Jamshedpur not from the Tata but from the employers. His disapprobation is due, I expect, to the fact that the late Mr. Ratan Tata was in the chair . . . well I am not ashamed of the honour. *Mr. Tata appeared to me to be a humane and considerate employer. He readily granted, I think, all the prayers of the employees and I heard from the latter that the agreement was being honourably kept* (emphasis added). I do ask and receive donations for my work from the rich as well as the poor. The former gladly give me their donations. This is no personal triumph. It is a triumph of non-violence which I endeavour to represent be it even so inadequately.'

It is curious to note that barely one year after Gandhiji's copious eulogy for the Tatas, the workers of Jamshedpur were forced to launch an extremely bitter struggle against the policy of repression, retrenchment and wage-cut of the same very Tatas.

Now reverting to the main issue, it may be noted that all attempts of the Labour Association, its president Rev. C. F. Andrews and lastly of Gandhiji to cool down the resentment of the workers pathetically failed. While the workers of Jamshedpur had been facing retrenchment, wage-cuts, additional workloads and were being crushed under the burden of many other problems, the Labour Association was interested more in hobnobbing with the management than in taking practical steps for solving those burning issues. The Labour Association in fact was acting as the agent of the company whose only duty was to convince the men of the generosity of the management's policy and desist them from the path of struggle. That this had been the actual role of the Labour Association was frankly admitted by the company itself. A resolution adopted by the Board of Directors of the company on 24 April 1928 while blamed the communist agitations for fomenting unrest among the workers, expressed warm approbation of the role of the union, stating that,⁴⁵ 'it is plain to the Directors that the strenuous endeavours which the Labour Association have made to explain the policy of the Management to the men and to satisfy them, are being thwarted by a distinct attempt on the part of the agitators. . . .'

So according to the management's own confession, the Labour Association under the presidentship of Rev. C. F. Andrews actually transformed itself into a Company Union.

Gandhiji's mediation persuaded the company to offer recognition to the Labour Association and also to make arrangement for compulsory deduction of the membership subscription from the wage-bill of the workers. But compulsory deduction of subscription could not, however, succeed to secure to the Association a compulsory loyalty of the workers.

While the workers were on strike, in a confidential letter addressed to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bihar and Orissa on 20 April 1928, the Board of Directors of the Company pitifully wrote,⁴⁶ 'A common future of all these strikes

and interruptions of work is that they have been entered into without the approval, and in some cases without the prior knowledge of the Labour Association, which is the men's own organization (under the presidency of Mr. C. F. Andrews). The Association is recognized by the company as a proper channel for the ventilation of grievances and the company has always given careful consideration to representations from the Association. In no case has the Management of the company been given any notice of a strike.'

This letter was a further confirmatory evidence that the the company-recognized Labour Association was actually an artificial and unrepresentative agency for which the men did not have the slightest regard.

However, the long drawn-out strike which commenced on April 18, was not an accidental affair. Sectional and departmental actions, since two months at least, had been forecasting this big action. The company wrote to the government on 25 April 1928,⁴⁷ 'It will be within the knowledge of government that on several occasions, during the last two months, there have been sectional or departmental strikes in the works of the Steel company at Jamshedpur. . . . The first strike commenced on February 17th and affected the drivers of all the electric cranes, which are essential in the handling of materials. . . . After a fortnight later, the men in the rail-finishing department struck work and prevented the completion and despatch of rails. . . . Subsequently there have been interruptions of work for a few hours at the cokeovens, . . . the sheet-mill workers struck on the 18th instant and the boiler plant on the 21st. The men of both these departments are still on strike. . . . The sweepers have also been on strike since 17th. . . .'

Thus began the strike in all the departments of the company. The workers demanded,⁴⁸ (1) General increase of pay at least 25 per cent, (2) Graded scale with annual increments, (3) Bonus, (4) Formation of a committee of 15 workers for consultations before any man was suspended or discharged.

The Labour Association disclaimed all responsibilities of the strike. And the company said,⁴⁹ 'The strikers have, to the best of the company's belief, been instigated by known communists resident in Jamshedpur and have been in frequent communication with communists in other parts of India on the subject

of these strikes. Meetings of the strikers held in Jamshedpur have been addressed by Singaravelu Chetty, Munkunda Lal Sircar and similar agitators from outside.'

On May 8, the management issued orders dismissing all strikers. The dismissed strikers accepted one Mr. Homi as their leader⁵⁰ and organized a complete *hartal* on May 25. Then as demands were not conceded, a two-day *hartal* was observed on June 1 and 2.

The company maintained an absolutely adamant attitude and was determined to wear out the strikers who were already dismissed from service.

Likewise the workers also remained firm and resolved to continue the strike. Thus a complete deadlock persisted. In this situation both Mr. Homi and the Labour Association approached Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose to intervene in the dispute for bringing about a settlement. Accordingly on September 3 Mr. Bose started negotiation with the General Manager and ultimately a settlement was arrived at which included among others: Reinstatement of the workers dismissed during the strike, a paltry wage-increase, one month's salary as advance and no victimization for participation in the strike. About this Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose wrote,⁵¹ 'a settlement was arrived at between the workers and the management, which was extremely favourable to the former.'

But this 'extremely favourable' settlement could not, however, uniformly satisfy the workers. Rather, it created dissension among them. As Mr. K. N. Joglekar informs,⁵² 'Mr. Homi had organized a rival labour organization named the Jamshedpur Labour Federation and he disagreed with the terms of settlement, and advised the workers not to accept.' He further informs, 'conflicting advice was given to the workers and they were split; by this method half the work was done in forcing them back to work.'

An observation of Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, the mediator of the dispute further confounded the confusion. According to Mr. Joglekar while negotiating the settlement Mr. Bose remarked,⁵³ 'Jamshedpur Labour has got to be saved and in order to save Labour, the Indian Steel industry must be saved from bankruptcy.'

Thus a splendid struggle ended in confusion and the wor-

kers returned to work on September 13.

This six-month long strike was full of lessons in many respects. On the one side it demonstrated the undaunted spirit and excellent heroism of the workers and on the other it glaringly revealed the attitude of some of the national leaders towards the big Indian capitalists and the depth of treachery to which a reformist union was apt to droop itself.

Besides these big and prolonged strikes, several other strikes of considerable importance occurred during this period. Oil Workers' strike at Budge Budge near Calcutta, Golmuri Tinplate workers' strike near Jamshedpur, textile workers' strikes at Sholapur, Madras and Kanpur and jute workers' strike at Visakhapatnam were especially noteworthy. The sweepers of Calcutta, Howrah and Bombay municipalities also participated in strikes and secured some concessions. Many other minor strikes also occurred in different industrial units of the country in this period. The events of the major strikes discussed above amply demonstrate the trends and characteristics of the period under review, and so further detailed discussion on other strikes would obviously be a needless exercise.

To sum up, this was a period when the national liberation struggle not only attained a tremendous sweep, it also emerged reoriented with a new revolutionary enthusiasm by the massive participation of the working class. Unprecedentedly organized and protracted economic struggles of the workers added further degrees of warmth and vigour to this new political sweep.

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25. *Meerut Conspiracy Case Records*, Vol. 3(5), Defence Statement of K. N. Joglekar, p. 1936.
26. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3(6), Defence Statement of S. A. Dange.
27. R. P. Dutt, *India To-day*, p. 339.
28. D. O. Letter from Mr. George Rainy, Secretary of the Commerce Deptt. addressed to Mr. H. G. Hedge, Secretary of the Home Deptt., Govt. of India, Home Deptt. F. No. 18/XIV/1928-Poll & K. W. quoted by Muzaffar Ahmad in *Myself and the Communist Party of India*, Bengali Edition, Vol. II, p. 53.
29. Note annexed to D.O. Letter No. 5(1) 2830 dt. 24 September 1934 from R. N. Maxwell, Secretary to the Govt. of Bombay to Secretary, Home Deptt., Govt. of India *vide Communism in India*, 1925-34, Edited by Subodh Roy, p. 307.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
31. *Bombay Labour Gazette*, September 1929.
32. *Ibid.*, November 1929.
33. *Ganabani*, 26 July 1928 *vide Report on Native News Papers and Periodicals*, 1928, Govt. of Bengal.
34. Dewan Chaman Lall, *Coolie—The Story of Labour and Capital in India*, Vol. I, p. 39.
35. Muzaffar Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party of India*, Bengali edition, Vol. II, pp. 41-44.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
39. *Five Strikes in Jute Mills* (1920), (in Bengali) Bengal Chatkal Majdoor Union, p. 9.
40. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 July 1929.

41. *Five Strikes in Jute Mills* (1920), (in Bengali) Bengal Chatkal Majdoor Union, p. 2.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
43. *Indian Annual Register*, 1927, Vol. II, p. 68.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
45. Home (Pol.) Deptt. File No. 18/11/28-Poll, 1928, Govt. of India.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. Ahmad Mukhtar, *Trade Unionism and Labour Disputes in India*, pp. 43-50.
49. Home (Pol.) Deptt. File No. 18/11/28-Poll., 1928, Govt. of India.
50. Ahmad Mukhtar, *Trade Unionism and Labour Disputes in India*, pp. 43-50.
51. Subhas Chandra Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, Netaji Publishing Society, Calcutta, p. 216, 217.
52. *Meerut Conspiracy Case Records*, Vol. 3(5), p. 1974.
53. *Meerut Conspiracy Case Records*, Vol. 3(5), p. 1974.

ORGANIZATIONAL SPLIT AND IMPERIALIST ONSLAUGHT 1929-31

THE period under review witnessed the gravest ever conspiracy hatched up by the imperialist government aiming at complete annihilation of the rising working-class and communist movement of the country. And regretfully this was also the period when the trade union movement of the country was faced with the gravest ever organizational set-back—a vertical split in the All India Trade Union Congress. Before entering into details of these circumstances, some preceding events foreshadowing the danger are taken up for discussion.

Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Session of AITUC :

These three sessions of AITUC, though were devoid of much zeal and enthusiasm, were marked with some events which happened to be the immediate causes for the split in the next session.

The seventh session of AITUC was held at Hind College Hall, Delhi on 12 and 13 March 1927 under the presidency of Rai Sahib Chandrika Prasad. Among the notable personalities present in the session were Messrs. A. Srinivasan Ayengar, A. Clow, Lajpat Rai, Madan Mohan Malavya, G. D. Birla, Chaman Lall, Rangaswami Ayengar and Barucha. Mr. Shapurji Saklatvala was in attendance as a specially invited guest. Delegates from seventeen unions attended the session.

The session was a dull affair and when it met, the heroic strike of the workers of B. N. Railway at Kharagpur had just come to an end. The presidential speech of Rai Sahib Chandrika Prasad while referring to this great strike laid bare the grossly reformist outlook of the AITUC leadership. Dilating on the circumstances leading to withdrawal of the strike, he was reported to have

remarked,¹ 'that though the terms offered by the Agents were not satisfactory, strike had been called off in the interest of public convenience. They, as a rule, did not advocate strike as a weapon to secure redress of their wrongs. Their policy was to settle all differences between employers and employees by negotiation, arbitration or Conciliation Boards'.

But the speech of the invited guest, Mr. Shapurji Saklatvala struck a completely different note. In his speech he stressed the necessity of establishing political authority on the State-machinery by the working class. Referring to the aims of the trade unions he remarked,² 'Freedom was a mockery unless the workers could not become their masters. Trade Unionism was desired to secure that object. Proceeding, Mr. Saklatvala suggested certain improvements in the existing management of the trade union movement in India and advised the session to work for organizational uplift of AITUC. He pointed at the necessity of keeping systematic accounts, circulation of trade union literature among the members and of conducting research work on the condition of the workers as well as of the industries.

Mr. Chaman Lall and Mr. Mrinal Kanti Basu were elected president and vice-president respectively. Mr. N. M. Joshi was elected general secretary while Mr. S. V. Ghate became the assistant secretary. After the last session the headquarter of AITUC had been shifted to Calcutta but this session decided to take it back to Bombay.

The eight session of AITUC was held at Kanpur, on 26 and 27 November 1927 under the chairmanship of Mr. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. This session was attended by a number of foreign guests. They were Mr. Marvy Jones, M.P., Mr. A. A. Purcell, M.P. and Mr. Hallsworth, M.P. of British Trade Union Congress and Mr. Phillip Spratt from British Communist Party. Among the other notables were Messrs. N. M. Joshi, V. V. Giri, Muzaffar Ahmad, S. A. Dange, Chandrika Prasad Jhabwala, C. F. Andrews, Muhammad Daud, Kedarnath, Kishorilal Ghosh, G. Sethi and Dr. Biswanath Mukherjee.

At the time of the session, 59 unions with a membership of 125,000 were affiliated to the AITUC.

The most important among the decisions taken by the session was of boycotting the Simon Commission. By then National Congress too had decided to boycott the Commission.

Besides, a decision was also taken for drawing up a Labour Constitution for the future administration of India. A sub-committee was formed for the purpose with Mr. N. M. Joshi, Mr. S. A. Dange as members among others. A resolution demanding minimum wage for the workers was also adopted. The resolution stated³ 'In view of the fact that wages in India are extremely low and also in view of the fact that it is the right of the workers to get a minimum living wage, this Congress urges upon the Government of India to pass legislation to set up a machinery to determine the minimum wage.'

A remarkable aspect of this session was the receipt of congratulatory messages from a number of foreign communist and labour organizations. Communist Party of Great Britain, Independent Labour Party of that country, International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam sent messages warmly greeting the conference. On behalf of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress too a very significant message was sent. Hoping for a mutual bond of sympathy and union between Ireland and India, the message pointed out, 'that the solution of the political problem is a condition precedent to the solution of labour problems, and secondly that political freedom of itself cannot mean true freedom for the workers.' The message concluded by looking forward 'with hope both to the advancement of India towards political freedom and to the progress of Indian workers towards social and economic freedom.'⁴

While addressing the session Mr. Purcell, fraternal delegate from the British Trade Union Congress touched upon some interesting points. He said, 'To most British workers India is a land of strangeness, mystery and romance. In the elementary schools, where they receive such education as they do receive, and in the newspapers and magazines which they read subsequently, the workers of Great Britain are badly misinformed as to real state of affairs in India. In your dealings with the British workers you should make allowance for the kind of mental attitude which is specially engendered by the governing class. It is our desire to dispel some of the illusions about India when we return.' Continuing, he drew attention to a particular aspect of Indian trade union movement. He said 'The growth of trade unionism in our country has been largely coincident with the growth of capitalism itself. The young Indian movement is, how-

ever, faced with the experienced and highly organized movement of the employers in the country.⁵ Explaining the contrast in concrete terms he pointedly said, 'The cotton mills of Lancashire work 32 hours per week. The cotton mills of India work 63 hours a week. In every industry in India, we find the workers working almost twice as long as their fellow-workers in similar industries in Britain and America'.⁶

The session on the other hand by way of a commendable performance of international duties, sent messages of greetings to the Soviet Union. A resolution was adopted congratulating this first workers' state of the world for successfully reaching the tenth year of its glorious existence in spite of armed imperialist intervention to smash it.

The session elected Rev. C. F. Andrews, president and Mr. N. M. Joshi and Mr. S. A. Dange as general secretary and assistant secretary respectively of the organization for the following year.

The ninth session of AITUC was held at Jharia on 18-20 December 1928. 200 delegates representing 42 affiliated unions with a membership of 98,000 attended the session.

A special feature which marked this session was the presence of Mr. J. W. Johnstone and Mr. J. F. Ryan on behalf of League Against Imperialism and Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat respectively.

On the occasion of the strike on the E.I. Railway at Liluah, Mr. Johnstone went to the workers and addressed their meetings. He had also the credit of joining an active campaign in support of the strike of the jute workers at Bauria. Police took him to custody just after Jharia Congress. Mr. J. F. Ryan was a member of the Australian Communist Party and Chairman of the New South Wales Trade and Labour Council.

The proceedings of the session was marked by the adoption of an important resolution which declared the aim of AITUC to transform India into a Socialist Republic of the Workers. It was also resolved to send 50 delegates of AITUC to the All-Parties Conference which was scheduled to meet in Calcutta on 22 December 1928. The delegation was instructed to place the following demands before the conference.⁷

1. Nationalization of Land and Industry.
2. Universal adult suffrage.

3. Right to go on strike.
4. The Constitution to be based on the principles of a Socialist Republic of working classes and the abolition of the States and landlords.

By another resolution decision was taken to apply for affiliation of the AITUC to the League Against Imperialism, Berlin. Mr. D. R. Thengdi and Mr. K. N. Joglekar were nominated to attend the Paris Session of the League Against Imperialism which was scheduled to be held in July 1929. Another significant resolution adopted was for calling an Asiatic Labour Congress at Bombay at an early date. A resolution was also adopted condemning the Trade Disputes Bill and deciding to call for one day's general strike as a protest.

In their speeches delivered in the conference both Mr. Johnstone and Mr. Ryan appealed for affiliation of AITUC to the respective organizations they represented. Besides these two foreign delegates, Mr. Benjamin Franklin Bradley, Mr. Phillip Spratt, Mr. Kirk and several other fraternal delegates from Europe attended the session. Among the notable Indians were Messrs. Jawaharlal Nehru, Chaman Lall, Muzaffar Ahmad, N. M. Joshi, Bhupendra Nath Dutta, R. R. Bakhale, Samsuddin Ahmad, Kishorilal Ghosh, Aftab Ali, Mrs. Santosh Kumari Gupta and several other labour and mass leaders.

Fraternal greetings were received from the National Minority Movement in Great Britain, British Trade Union Congress, Irish Labour Party and U.S.S.R. The session received a telegram from League Against Imperialism, Berlin, signed by Madame Sun-Yat-Sen, Saklatvala, Baldwin, Scot, Barbuse and several other men of eminence. The telegram after expressing fullest sympathy with the Indian workers in their struggle against imperialism heartily invited AITUC to participate in the Anti-Imperialist World Congress which was to be held in July 1929.⁸

The conference elected Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru as the new president and Messrs. Muzaffar Ahmad, V. B. Kulkarni, Bhupendra Nath Dutta and G. Sethi were elected vice-presidents. Mr. S. A. Dange was elected as one of the assistant secretaries.

It is to be noted that it was this Jharia session which witnessed the appearance of the communists as an organized and compact group within AITUC.

First Observance of May-Day in India :

The general secretary's report placed at the eighth session of AITUC held in November 1927 at Kanpur referred to the observance of May-day in that year at Bombay and several other places of the country. And, it was from the year 1927 that observance of May-Day in India started in an organized manner.

Observance of May-Day in India was actually a much-delayed phenomenon. The movement for Eight-Hour working day which the American working class had started in the sixth decade of the nineteenth century reached its zenith in the worker's strike on 1 May 1886 at Chicago. The police brutalities that followed took a toll of four workers' lives. The subsequent event was a mockery of trial and then putting to death in the gallows four immortal leaders of the American working class—Parsons, Spize, Fisher and Engel. Three years after these events of Chicago, the leaders of the socialist movement of various countries of the world met at Paris on 14 July 1889, to observe the centenary celebrations of the historic fall of Bastil. This Paris Congress of the socialists in a resolution called upon the world labour to observe 1 May 1890 as an international day of demonstration. Accordingly May-Day was observed in 1890 in different countries of Europe. Since then May-Day is being observed every year by the world labour as the day of international solidarity of the working class.

In India though May-Day was first observed in an organized manner only in 1927 in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and other labour centres at the direction of AITUC, isolated instances of May-Day observance prior to 1927 are also on record. May-Day was observed in Bombay in 1926 also. Municipal workers formed the main contingent of the May-Day demonstration of that year which was led by Messrs. N. M. Joshi, S. S. Mirajkar and S. V. Ghate and other labour leaders.

One author writes,⁹ 'May-Day was first observed in India on 1 May 1923 at the sea-beach of Madras under the presidency of Singaravelu Chettiar, a labour leader. That meeting appealed to the government to declare this sacred day of the world working class as a holiday.' He writes further, 'Comrade Chettiar was an accused in the Kanpur conspiracy case of 1924. From him Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad heard that incident of 1923. Red Flag was hoisted over the house of comrade Chettiar, no red

flag being ready at hand he prepared the flag by tearing off his daughter's saree.'

*Communist Domination in Working-Class Movement—
A New Feature :*

The storm of working-class movement that swept the different industrial centres of India during 1926-29 resulted in the rise of a left-oriented leadership spearheaded by the communists. Tested in the crucible of militant struggle, the communists of India rose as the most trusted and beloved leaders of a big section of the Indian working class. The protracted strikes of the railway workers on different Indian railways, the long drawn-out general strike of the Bombay textile workers, tortuous strikes in the jute industry of Bengal and the steel industry of Jamshedpur and many other forceful struggles that burst forth in different parts of the country imparted the communists an invaluable schooling in the art of militant trade unionism. The historic Girni Kamgar Union and other mighty unions of the workers in the railways, in the jute and other industries that were scrupulously built up in the process of these struggles acted as the strong organizational base for the communists and the militant leftists to guide and conduct the rising wave of proletarian struggle.

This new feature generated an enlivening process in the trade unions of India. The rise of trade union membership from 59,544 in 1926 to 200,335 in 1929 in Bombay alone was a pointer to this direction.

Since the inception of Indian trade union movement the national bourgeoisie had been unchallengingly installed in the leadership. But the sharp class struggles of the period altered the existing condition and threw up the militant and left elements as the dominant force in the leadership of the movement. The seventh, eighth and ninth sessions of AITUC heard louder and louder the challenging militant voices of this emerging leadership. The old reformist leadership thus lost their absolute hegemony and was put to a weaker position.

The AITUC sessions of this period were marked with heated debates on the question of the workers' participation in political actions. Mr. N. M. Joshi, a long time general secretary of AITUC was against the workers' political involvement. As

a member of the Legislative Assembly he fought for social legislation for the workers but could not approve of their political entanglement. On the other side, National Congress, although on occasions felt the necessity of the workers' participation in national-political struggle and during the first non-co-operation movement tried to draw in the working-class masses, could not approve of an independent role of the working class in the political struggle of the country. Not only that, the attitude of Congress towards the working-class struggles, even for economic demands, was a lukewarm one without any real sincerity, in spite of the fact that many a individual Congress leader were connected with AITUC. Even a constitutionalist like Mr. N. M. Joshi had to pungently remark,¹⁰ 'Although the Indian National Congress and other political organizations have on some occasions passed resolutions in favour of Labour organization, they have not rendered any practical assistance to the movements and as their organizations are at present dominated by the capitalists of the upper middle-classes, it will be futile to expect them to do very much in the future in that direction.'

Dewan Chaman Lall and Lala Lajpat Rai both of whom were in the leadership of AITUC often used to say that 'the workers must have their own politics'. But their vision was blurred by the ideal of the British Labour Party. Completely deceived by the word 'labour' they failed to realize the real character of that party and that was why Lala Lajpat Rai thought of forming a Labour Party in India in the pattern of British Labour Party. But when the British Government appointed Simon Commission without any Indian representation and included two representatives of the Labour Party—Mr. C. R. Atlee and Mr. Vernon Hertshon in that Commission, they suddenly woke up to the idea that the British Labour Party had betrayed the Indians and thereafter they abandoned their plan of forming a Labour Party in India.

While this was in nutshell the confusing political stand of the national reformist labour leaders side by side with the not-so-zealous attitude of the National Congress as a whole towards the rising labour movement, the communists and other left elements on the contrary got organized in the Workers' and Peasants' Party and went ahead with positive belief on an independent and militant working-class movement and felt the need

of politicalization of the workers and their struggles.

Thus there followed an intense battle between two lines of action in the labour movement of the country, one—the constitutionalist and reformist path of not-too-much struggle with emphasis on constitutional remedy and a subordinate role of the working class in the national-political movement and the other—the path of revolutionary class struggle and an independent and vanguard political role of the working class.

In respect of international connection also sharp conflict arose between these two lines. While the former was on the move to affiliate AITUC to International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam—the world centre of reformist trade unions, the latter made all endeavours to affiliate AITUC to Red International Labour Union, Moscow and the anti-imperialist 'Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat', the world centres of revolutionary trade unions. As has already been seen, the sessions of AITUC were attended by some foreign delegates who had affiliations with these international revolutionary centres.

The ideo-theoretical and organizational directions for the trade union movement as conducted by the communists and other radicals were summed up in a thesis on trade union movement adopted in the conference of All India Workers' and Peasants' Party held in Calcutta in 1928. Considering the historical significance of this thesis in the development of Indian trade union movement, reproduction of some important sections of it, although a little lengthy, is made below. These sections of the thesis throw sufficient light on the ideological position of the communists and other leftists in trade union movement as well as on their attitude towards the reformist trade unionism. The thesis stated *inter alia* :¹¹

(1) The Trade Unions, which arise spontaneously from the condition of modern industrialism, have as their primary function to fight for the immediate needs of the working class, that is to raise their standard of life. In the course of the Trade Union struggle, the need is felt for the entry of the working class into the political field and eventually for it to take direct political action with revolutionary aims. The necessity then arises for the political organ of working class, which takes a leading part in its political struggles. The importance of the Trade Unions in the Political sphere lies in the fact that they are a means of preparing the workers for political action, and in that they are the basic mass organizations of

the workers, which can rally even the relatively backward sections to take part in the struggle in an organized way.

(2) For the purpose of conducting economic struggle, the best type of organization for the Trade Union Movement is Industrial Unionism, a plan of organization in which all the workers of each industry are in one union, covering the whole country. Industrial unionism is opposed on the one hand to division of the workers by craft, by locality or by employment etc., and on the other hand to organization of the workers into multiple unions, which necessarily lack complete unity of interest. . . . The basis of the union is its branches. No union has a genuine existence unless its members are all organized in branches, in which they meet regularly and frequently, and discuss and decide the union policy. Branches should be established, preferably according to the place of work, but if necessary according to the place of residence, of the members, and in such a way that all members have easy access to one branch. Branch committees should be established, but primarily, for the conduct of routine business. So far as possible all questions of policy, election of representative delegates etc. should be decided by branch meetings. . . .

(3) The economic policy of the Unions can only be one of unremitting aggression. A continued fight must be waged in all industries for the improvement of the fundamental condition, wages and hours, principally of the workers. This does not mean that other matters, such as enforcement of Factory legislation, the Compensation Act etc. should be neglected. But it means that the essential plank in the programme on which the workers are organized is the demand for substantial improvements. For each industry a comprehensive programme should be worked out, in which these demands take a prominent place, and the workers asked to unite to enforce the programme. If necessary the workers must be restrained from taking too hasty action, without sufficient resources and solidarity to carry through the struggle properly, but when preparations are sufficient, action must be taken.

The policy of industrial peace, which has proved so ruinous even in prosperous and well organized countries, must be definitely thrust out of Indian Trade Union movement. It is practising gross deception upon the workers to tell them, as many leaders do, that the object of Trade unionism is to preserve peaceful relations between employers and employees. The object of Trade Unionism is to fight employers for improvements. . . .

The Trade Union movement must also take a clear line in the international sphere. The move on the part of the right-wing to affiliate Trade Union Congress to the I.F.T.U. (Amsterdam) must be fought by all possible means, and also the tendency of individual union to affiliate to the International Trade Union Secretariat of the I.F.T.U. On the contrary the Trade Union Congress must affiliate with R.I.L.U. (Moscow). It is desirable that the Trade

Union Congress is affiliated to the anti-imperialist "Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat" (Shanghai) and not to the Pan Asiatic Federation of Labour which is being instituted by the most reactionary of the Japanese Trade Union. The T.U.C. should also be affiliated to the League Against Imperialism.

Thus equipped ideologically, the communists and the other leftists zealously devoted themselves to the task of organizing militant trade union movement and outflanked the constitutional veterans. Simultaneously with the sharp economic struggles, the workers boldly entered the political arena also and exerted pressure on the National Congress for adopting a radical and unambiguous policy in the direction of national freedom. This working-class political initiative climaxed in an event during the Calcutta session of the National Congress in December 1928. At the call of Calcutta Trawaymen's Union, Bengal Jute Workers' Association, East India Railway Labour Union, and several other labour organizations a demonstration of 30,000 workers led by Muzaffar Ahmad, Bankim Mukherjee, Sibnath Banerjee, Gopen Chakravarty, Dharani Goswami, Radharaman Mitra, Kiran Chandra Mitra and other communists and labour leaders advanced towards the venue of the Congress session. Raising radical slogans like 'Workers of the world—unite', 'Long Live independent Indian republic', 'we have nothing to lose but the chains,' the demonstrators reached the conference pandal. Ignoring resistance by the Congress volunteers, thousands of demonstrators entered the conference pandal and held a massive meeting. Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru had to preside over the meeting and it was addressed by Mr. Bankim Mukherjee, Mr. R. S. Nimbkar and other prominent labour leaders. The most significant part of the happening was the adoption of a resolution demanding complete freedom for India. The resolution stated:¹² "The mass meeting of the workers and peasants from all industries declare that we the workers and peasants of the land shall not rest content till complete independence is established and all exploitation from capitalism and imperialism cease. We do call upon the National Congress to keep that goal before them and organize the national forces for that purpose."

It is specially noteworthy that in 1928 when the working class declared full freedom of India as its unambiguous politi-

cal aim, the National Congress led by the bourgeoisie could not yet go so far as to declare that goal and for that they had to wait one year more.

These developments in the spheres of economic and political struggles of India produced on the other side two-fold immediate effects—one within the working-class movement, the frictions between the right-wing and left-wing resulting into a sharp organizational cleavage and the other outside the movement, the imperialist conspiracy to thwart the militant advance.

In January 1929, Viceroy Lord Irwin openly expressed in the Legislative Assembly the government's grave concern at the wide dissemination of communist ideology. In Annual reports of 1928-29 also, the Government of India expressed deep concern at the growing influence of communist ideology over the working class in the big cities of the country.

Not only the imperialist government, even a section of the nationalist press and the arch-reformist labour leaders like Mr. B. Shiva Rao expressed grave consternation at the steadily expanding communist activities and infiltration of communist ideology into the masses of workers of the country. Adding force to the government's conspiratorial attempts to annihilate the communists and other radicals, Mr. B. Shiva Rao openly voiced his panicky outcry:¹³ 'The time has come when the trade union movement in India should weed out of its organization mischief-makers. A warning is all the more necessary because there are certain individuals who go about preaching the gospel of strike.'

The working-class pressure on the Calcutta session of Congress for declaring the aim of complete independence combined with a left swing even among the Congress delegates caused deep anxiety to Lord Irwin. While contemplating action to meet this threat, this representative of imperialism held parleys with Mr. Vithalbhai Patel, President of the Legislative Assembly, 'who advised Irwin to contact Gandhiji because in his opinion Gandhiji was in favour of the British connection and would not make difficulty about an accommodation of the Dominion Status idea.'¹⁴

The imperialists lost no time to strike back and at the same time the split came, but it was also true that the working class did not waste much time to stage a revival. The struggle

of the masses too for complete liberation of the country could not be forestalled either by the imperialist onslaught or by the clever manoeuvrings of the compromising leadership.

Trade Disputes Legislation :

Trade Dispute Legislation was thus skilfully contrived as a weapon to counter-attack the working class. Afraid of the bitter and protracted strike struggles of the workers on the railways and of other important sections of industries, the government hurried through this bill in the Central Legislative Assembly in September 1928 and made final enactment in April 1929. Trade Disputes Act, 1928 was largely similar to the repressive provisions of the British Trade Disputes and Trade Union Act, 1927 but the former's reactionary character was more pronounced. The latter Act which was repressive and anti-labour in character was passed by the British Government after the general strike of the British workers in 1926. The Act was, however, repealed when the Labour Government came to power in 1946.

The anti-labour Trade Disputes Act, 1928 consists of three parts. The first provides formation of conciliation Board and Courts of Enquiry for settlement of disputes, the second part provides fine or imprisonment or both for strike or lock-out in public utility services without 14 days' notice and the third is modelled in the pattern of the British Act banning general strike or sympathetic strike of the workers but in a more stringent manner than the British one. The Act provides imprisonment for 3 months and a fine of Rs. 200 for joining or abetting an illegal strike. Moreover, provisions have also been made in the Act rendering protection to those who refuse to take part in strike and also legally enabling them to claim compensation from the union.

This Act thus prohibited general strike of the working class in trade union as well as in political struggle of the country.

The Jharia session of AITUC held in 1928 strongly criticized this Act. The Act was subjected to scathing criticism by the All India Workers' and Peasants' Party in its Calcutta Conference in December 1928. Stating that it was an attack upon the trade union movement as a whole, the conference analysed the Bill part by part.

Lashing at the provisions of Conciliation Board and Court

of Inquiry, it said, 'This proposal must be fought, not merely on grounds of detail, but on principle. . . . It tends to minimise the importance of organized strength and make the workers depend upon the justice of their case from bourgeois point of view, and the sympathy of bourgeois conciliators for the poverty. . . .' About the second and third parts preventing strikes in Railways, posts, telegraphs etc. and sympathetic and general strikes, it said that these are 'sheer repression and must be fought with all the strength at the disposal of labour.'¹⁵

A section of the Indian press also voiced their protest against this Bill. On 13 August 1928, *Viswamitra* a news daily published from Calcutta wrote,¹⁶ 'If the Bill be placed on the statute book it would mean the end of all labour organizations in India and bring about the enslaving of the labour community at the hands of the capitalists'. On 16 August 1928, *Ganavani*, the radical weekly published from Calcutta wrote,¹⁷ 'The Bill spells eternal slavery for labour. The labourers all over India should combine and wage a war for the withdrawal of the Bill.'

The British Government passed this Bill in the teeth of stout opposition against it by the trade union movement of the country.

Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case 1929 :

Thus equipped with an Act to illegalise any future outbreak of working-class strike-action, the government took the next step of dealing the most serious blow on the working class and its vanguard fighters—the communists of India. On 20 March 1929, the British Government made a sudden swoop upon 31 leaders of the working-class and communist movement of the country and arrested them. Besides these 31, one more was arrested subsequently. This trial, one of the longest and largest in world history, was conducted at Meerut, a small town isolated from the industrial centres of India. This trial was widely known as 'Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case.'

Whatever might be the subsequent roles and activities of some of them, these 31 communist and non-communist accused stood as the best forces of the revolutionary labour and peasant movements of India of that time. These accused were :

1. Muzaffar Ahmad, Vice-President of AITUC and Secre-

- tary of the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party.
2. S. V. Ghate, Formerly Assistant Secretary of AITUC.
 3. K. N. Joglekar, Organizer of the G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union and member, All India Congress Committee.
 4. D. R. Thengdi, Formerly President of AITUC and Member, All India Congress Committee.
 5. S. A. Dange, General Secretary of Girni Kamgar Union and Assistant Secretary of AITUC. An accused in the Cawnpore Conspiracy Case, 1924.
 6. Kishorilal Ghosh, Secretary of Bengal Trade Union Federation.
 7. S. H. Jhabwalla, Organizing Secretary of the All India Railwaymen's Federation and a leader of the Girni Kamgar Union.
 8. Shaukat Usmani: He was in contact with M. N. Roy. Visited Tashkend, Moscow and other places, arrested in Cawnpore Conspiracy Case 1924 on his return to India.
 9. S. S. Mirajkar, Assistant Secretary of Girni Kamgar Union.
 10. P. C. Joshi, Secretary of the United Provinces Workers' and Peasants' Party.
 11. Gopal Basak, President of Socialist Youth League in 1928.
 12. M. A. Majid, Secretary of Punjab Kirti Kisan Party.
 13. R. S. Nimbkar, Secretary of Bombay Provincial Congress Committee, General Secretary of All India Workers' and Peasants' Party and member of All India Congress Committee.
 14. Dr. Viswanath Mukherjee, President of the United Provinces Workers' and Peasants' Party.
 15. Radharaman Mitra, Secretary of Bengal Jute Workers' Union.
 16. Dharani Goswami, Assistant Secretary of the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party.
 17. Gopen Chakravarty, a leader of the East India Railway Workers' Union.
 18. Shamsul Huda, Secretary of the Bengal Transport Workers' Union.
 19. Sohan Singh Josh, President of the first conference of

- the All India Workers' and Peasants' Party.
20. Gouri Shankar, a leader of the United Provinces Workers' and Peasants' Party.
 21. Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari, a young Marxist just returned from Germany and a contributor to the Socialist paper *Spark* published from Bombay.
 22. Sibnath Banerjee, President of the Bengal Jute Workers' Union.
 23. Ajodhya Prasad, a leader of the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party.
 24. Kedar Nath Sehgal, President of the Punjab Congress Committee and member of the All India Youth League.
 25. Arjun Atmaram Alve, President of the Girni Kamgar Union.
 26. Gobinda Ramchandra Kasle, a leader of the Girni Kamgar Union.
 27. M. G. Desai, Editor of *Spark*, a socialist paper published from Bombay.
 28. Lakshman Rao Kadom, Organizer of the Municipal Workers' Union at Jharia.
 29. Benjamin Francis Bradley, Member of the British Communist Party, a British labour leader, member of the Executive Committee of G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union and Girni Kamgar Union, Vice-President of All India Railwaymen's Federation and Treasurer of the Joint Strike Committee of the Bombay Textile workers.
 30. Phillip Spratt, Member of the British Communist Party and member of the Executive Committee of AITUC.
 31. Hugh Lester Hutchinson, a British journalist, editor of the *New Spark*.

One more was arrested in the first list. He was Choudhury Dharamvir Singh of Meerut but he was released on being committed to session. Hugh Lester Hutchinson was arrested subsequently. Another name was also listed for arrest. He was Ameer Haidar Khan. Sensing an immediate arrest he went in hiding and fled to Europe. Subsequently on his return, he was engaged in communist activities in Madras. But at the fag-end of Meerut trial he was caught by the police. He was then tried at Madras and was sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment.¹⁸

This historic trial was conducted on a gigantic scale and

lasted for nearly four years and a half. The evidence consisted of 25 printed volumes of folio size. There were altogether 3,500 prosecution exhibits, over 1,500 defence exhibits, and no less than 320 witnesses were examined. The judgement itself was in two printed volumes covering 676 pages of folio size.¹⁹ The trial cost the British Government a fabulous amount of nearly £160,000.

It appears from the list of the accused that they were the champions of the workers' and peasants' movement of India and many of them were members of the Communist Party of India. But this diabolic conspiracy of the British Government to strangle at birth the working-class and communist movement of India did not receive any support from the democratic minded people. On the contrary, this conspiracy of the imperialists became an object of deep contempt and was sharply denounced in and abroad.

The Meerut trial has been compared by Prof. Harold Laski to the Mooney Trial and the Sacco-Vanzetti Trial in America, the Drefus Trial in France and the Reichstag Fire Trial in Germany. He said, 'Men were torn from civil life for long years whose only crime was to carry out the ordinary work of trade union and political agitation after the fashion of everyday life in this country (England).'²⁰ The prosecution and the heavy sentence passed on the accused aroused a storm of protests from all quarters. Questions were asked in the House of Commons and besides Prof. Harold Laski, indignant protests were raised also by such international celebrities as Prof. Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, H. G. Wells, and the Arch-Bishop of York.

The charges that were brought against the accused included: Engaging in communist activities, forming labour unions, conducting strikes and similar other activities. Among the accused three were British citizens. Mr. Phillip Spratt and Mr. Benjamin Francis Bradley who were originally members of the British Communist Party came to India under instructions from Communist International to assist in the task of building labour organizations in India. The third, Mr. Hugh Lester Hutchinson, a free-lance journalist was a friend of the Indian workers. All these three British citizens stood on the dock arm in arm with their Indian comrades and eventually underwent a prison-life along with them. This glorious event exemplified a living unity

and international fraternity, the world working class had ever cherished.

Another most unusual characteristic which marked this trial was the decision of the accused to utilize the dock not for arguing in defence with the aim of escaping conviction, but as a platform for ideological propagation of Marxism, come what may. Muzaffar Ahmad, an accused and a founder of the Communist Party of India, writes,²¹ 'The Communists in the Meerut Conspiracy case acted in an altogether different manner. The statements they made day after day in the Sessions Court, instead of establishing any grounds in their favour, foredoomed all chances of escape. Through their statements the communist prisoners sought to establish Marxism ideologically and politically and to create conditions for the emergence of a strong Communist Party in India. That these statements could be used against them and even result in enhanced sentence mattered little to them.'

The imperialist government glibly calculated that removal of these leading communist agitators from the political arena would immediately be followed by a marked improvement in the industrial situation, would place the authorities in a commanding position and would create a vacuum in the leadership of the trade union movement.

This euphoria notwithstanding, the trial in actual practice produced a contrary result. Muzaffar Ahmad rightly writes,²² 'the Meerut Conspiracy Case turned out to be a political defeat for the British Government in India and victory for the Indian Communists. The way the Communists broadcast their ideology from the court-room at Government's expense has few parallels in history. Their removal from the field of actual movement far from creating a vacuum gave them, on the contrary, the opportunity of establishing through propaganda the Communist Party on firm foundations in India. The propaganda the communist accused carried on from the court-room led to re-thinking among the leaders of the terrorist movements and they joined the Communist Party in large numbers even before the end of the 1930's.'

One of the prisoners D. R. Thengdi passed away during pendency of the case. Three others, Dr. Viswanath Mukherjee, Sibrnath Banerjee and Kishorilal Ghosh were acquitted. And on

rest twentyseven, severe sentences were passed for different terms of imprisonment.

For defending the accused National Congress appointed Meerut Defence Committee with Mr. Motilal Nehru as president and his son Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru as secretary.

But this committee became defunct already before the conclusion of the trial. For conducting the case the accused had to depend mainly on the financial assistance rendered by the British working class. A Defence Committee was also formed in Great Britain. Financial assistance came from some parts of the country also, as well as from America and some countries of Europe. But the government allowed the accused to receive the contribution sent by the British workers only.

An appeal was filed on behalf of the accused before the High Court against the severe sentences passed by the Sessions Court. The judgement of the High Court on the appeal substantially reducing the sentences came as unexpectedly as was the original judgment of the Sessions Court imposing heavy sentences on the accused.

But the judgement of the High Court reducing the terms of imprisonment was not altogether accidental. The world-wide condemnation that greeted the trial put substantial pressure on the imperialists. Apprising him of the repercussions set off by the judgement of the Sessions court, the Government of India in a secret telegram sent to the Secretary for State in London stated,²³ 'On January 15th, judgement was delivered in the Meerut case and 27 out of 30 accused have been convicted of the offence of waging war against the King. Attention in the Press is focussed on the long duration of the case which started in June 1928, while the nationalist press comments on the severity of the sentences. *The importance of the case then tends to be overlooked* (emphasis added).'

The case was concluded after delivery of the judgement by the High Court on 3 August 1933.

Public Safety Ordinance :

The alarmed imperialist government could not feel safe only by conspiring to arrest the front-ranking leaders of the working-class and Communist movements of the country. Sufficiently ahead of the swoop of March 1929, the government introduced

a bill in 1928 in the Central Legislative Assembly designed for externment of the undesirable British citizens from India. It has already been seen that in the period under review fraternal representatives of the working-class and other anti-imperialist organizations used to visit India frequently and they were a source of inspiration to the Indian working-class movement. These visits further helped to create a fraternal relationship between the Indian working class and the working classes of other countries.

This Bill was specially aimed at some British communists and labour leaders like Mr. Bradley and Mr. Spratt who devoted themselves to the task of organizing the labour in India. But there did not exist any such Act which empowered the government to extern the British citizens who were undesirable in the eyes of the government. Moreover, the government had also no legal power for forfeiture of the financial contributions that were sometimes sent by the foreign labour organizations to their Indian counterparts in aid of particular struggle. The government introduced this Bill with the purpose of arming itself with these powers.

It was the hope of the British Government that raising the bogey of a 'Communist menace' this measure of suppressing communist activities would receive hearty support from the nationalists of India particularly at a time when the government had been dangling the carrot of constitutional reforms through the appointment of the Simon Commission. But, much to the disappointment of the imperialists, the far-reaching and dangerous significance of the Bill did not, however, escape the notice either of the left-militants or of the nationalists. The trade unions and the left oriented political leaders held public meetings in different centres of the country strongly protesting against the Bill. What more, in several meetings in Calcutta, Mr. Bradley and Mr. Spratt, against whom the Bill was aimed at, were invited to address.

And how the nationalists reacted after the introduction of the Bill is best told by Muzaffar Ahmad. He writes,²⁴ 'Led by Pandit Motilal Nehru, the Congress Party in the Indian Legislative Assembly decided that they would oppose the Bill. They said they had no weakness for the communists but the government had failed to convince the country of the reality of the

communist danger. Other parties including even the Independent Party of Murshidabad Ali Jinnah joined hands with the Congress on this issue. What Pandit Motilal Nehru wanted was to heat up the political atmosphere of the country before the session of the Congress which was to be held in December 1928 in Calcutta. And the events which followed justified expectations. At different places of the country meetings were held, protesting against the Bill. The substance of the views, expressed in these meetings, was that the government was without any reason trying to scare the country with the communist bogey. The Bill was debated for days together in the Central Assembly. When, finally, the Bill was put to vote, the government was defeated by the margin of one vote. Immediately after this, the autumn session of the Assembly concluded, and the Governor-General promulgated an ordinance incorporating the terms of the Bill.'

By the time the next session of the Assembly was held in March 1929, all the accused in the Meerut conspiracy case had been rounded up. Then the government after incorporating some fresh provisions in the Bill once again presented it before the Assembly. Muzaffar Ahmad writes,²⁵ 'Mr. Vithalbhai Patel, who was then the President of the Assembly, advised the government either to withdraw the Bill and proceed with the case. But the government paid no heed to his counsel. So when the government sought his leave to introduce the Bill, Mr. Patel, as President of the Assembly, gave the ruling that, as the Bill affected the sub-judice Meerut Conspiracy Case, the Assembly, could no longer discuss the Bill.'

The Government thus could not enact this Bill in the teeth of tremendous opposition, but kept the Ordinance in force as long as it was legally permitted.

The Indian peoples' movement rose to a sufficiently conscious stage as to realize the dangerous implications of this Bill whence arose this united opposition defeating the designs of the government. It is noteworthy in this connection that when the government had arrested Mr. J. W. Johnstone, a representative of the League Against Imperialism, on his arrival at India, the Jharia session of AITUC held in 1928 adopted a resolution strongly condemning his arrest.

Royal Commission on Labour in India 1929 :

These successive onslaughts on the militant labour movement of India were followed by the appointment of the Royal Commission on Labour in India under the presidency of Mr. J. H. Whitley in July 1929. The Commission was entrusted with the task of enquiring into the conditions of labour in India and to submit recommendations accordingly. The report and recommendations of the Commission were published on 14 March 1931.

The underlying intention of the government in appointing the committee was nothing better than to endue with some balmy fragrance the bruises just inflicted upon the working class of India. The imperialists had also another intention which was to throw an open allurements to the right-wing leaders of the Indian Labour movement for the latter's co-operation with the government in the name of labour welfare and getting them bogged in the protracted enquiries to be conducted by this Commission. The imperialists knew very well the extreme proneness of this right-wing leadership to join Commissions, Committees and International conferences and so as a clever manoeuvre they nominated Mr. Chaman Lall and Mr. N. M. Joshi as members of this Commission which they readily accepted.

This manoeuvre paid dividends to the imperialists. This Royal Commission on Labour in India in fact became an apple of discord between the right-wing and left-wing of the leaderships of AITUC and tremendous controversy that arose between these two sections on the outlook towards the Commission ultimately turned out to be one of the main reasons for the split in the AITUC.

But not only through the nomination to the Royal Commission, to win over the right-reformists the government tempted them with further baits. At subsequent stage in 1930, the government invited Mr. N. M. Joshi to join the Round Table Conference. Mr. Joshi accompanied by Mr. V. V. Giri accordingly joined that Conference, though the National Congress boycotted it. Besides this, Mr. R. R. Bakhale and several other rightists were appointed in several official committees and commissions relating to administrative and constitutional matters.

This way the imperialist government manoeuvred to create a trusted leadership in the labour movement of the country and

to widen up the area of co-operation between them and the government.

The First Split in AITUC :

The friction, between the left-wing and right-wing tendencies—between the communists and left-oriented nationalists on the one hand and the reformists and rightists on the other, that had been sharpening in the political and labour movements of the country for the last few years climaxed at the tenth session of AITUC held at Nagpur on 28-30 November 1929 and ultimately resulted into a split in this premier national-level organization of the Indian labour.

It is notable that this session was held at a time when a large section of the communists and militant labour leadership had been removed from the scene by instituting Meerut Conspiracy Case.

Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru presided over the session. At the very beginning of the session a dispute arose in the executive council over the question of inclusion of the Girni Kamgar Union. The Girni Kamgar Union claimed a membership of 55,000 and demanded representation in the session accordingly. But the right-reformist group refused to accept the membership to be more than 6,000. Ultimately after a heated debate a modified membership of 40,000 was accepted by the casting vote of Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, the president of the session. It is worthwhile to refer here to a government report relating to the membership of this union which stated,²⁶ 'When the Union initiated this strike (the general strike of April 1929—author) it had a membership equal to that of any other half a dozen unions put together. Its accumulated funds amounted to Rs. 64,000 and its claim of membership of over 54,000 was by no means exaggerated.'

Anyway, while discussing the question of AITUC's approach towards the Royal Commission on Labour in India appointed just prior to the session, Mr. S. V. Deshpande moved a resolution in the executive council for boycotting the proceedings of the Commission which was accepted by a majority vote. It has already been mentioned that government nominated Mr. N. M. Joshi and Mr. Chaman Lall as members of that Commission. So the reformist leadership welcomed the Commission

and strongly pleaded for co-operation with it.

Coming to the issue of the report of Motilal Nehru Committee which the National Congress set up as a counterblast to the Simon Commission, the said report too was rejected by the executive council by a majority vote on the resolution moved by Mr. S. V. Deshpande. The resolution stated that Nehru report actually meant continuation of the British rule.

A heated discussion then followed on the question of AITUC's affiliation with the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat and a decision in favour of the affiliation was taken on a majority vote.

The session also decided by a majority vote not to nominate any representative of the AITUC to the future sessions of the International Labour Organization as according to the relevant resolution, 'any co-operation with it is a direct betrayal of the working class.'

Mr. N. M. Joshi moved a counter-proposal for convening an Asiatic Labour Congress but that too was defeated. Previously in the executive council held on February 6 at Delhi Mr. Joshi tried to affiliate AITUC to International Federation of Trade Unions of Amsterdam. In fact in 1928, in the Jharia session itself the delegates of G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union and B.B. & C.I. Railway Workmen's Union moved a resolution for affiliation of AITUC to the Red International of Labour Unions, Moscow. But the leftists at that time being minority in number, could not go much ahead with that move. ILO at the same time was criticized in the Jharia session by the leftists as a handiwork of the imperialists. Mr. N. M. Joshi was able to correctly realize whither the wind blew and so without waiting for the Nagpur session, he had already made an attempt to affiliate AITUC to the reformist Amsterdam International, but could not succeed.

In the Nagpur session, out of a total voting strength of 938, as much as 350 belonged to the Girni Kamgar Union and G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union. Executive Council accepted the credentials of 51 unions with a membership of 189,438, of which, the Girni Kamgar Union alone had a share of 40,000.

Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru who presided over the session did not represent any union. Against his presidentship, the radicals proposed the name of Mr. D. B. Kulkarni, a railway worker,

but the proposal was subsequently withdrawn. Mr. Nehru at that time was an executive member of the League Against Imperialism.

The resolutions were moved in the executive council by the Communist members and received the support of the left-nationalists. But the reformist veterans instead of accepting the resolutions which were decided by a majority vote, walked out of the conference and met in a separate meeting at the residence of Mr. N. M. Joshi. That meeting was attended by Messrs. V. V. Giri, B. Shiva Rao, Chaman Lall, N. V. R. Naidu, Mrinal Kanti Basu, R. R. Bakhale, K. C. Roychowdhury, Latafat Hossain and several others. In the meeting they decided not to participate in the proceedings of the session any further. They prepared a statement. But the delegates from Bengal who were present in the meeting wanted time to consider the desirability of signing that statement. Ultimately they prepared a statement of their own.

Later, after the walk-out of the right-reformists the resolution for AITUC's affiliation to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat was withdrawn by the initiators themselves. The Executive Council meeting concluded by electing Mr. F. J. Ginwala and Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose as president and general secretary respectively for the next term.

The open session of the conference was held on December 1 under the presidency of Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru. The president first read out the statement of Messrs. Joshi, Chaman Lall and others which alleged that 'the proceedings of the Executive Council of the AITUC have revealed beyond doubt the fact that the majority of the members are determined to commit the Congress to a policy with which we are in complete disagreement. The points of view of the majority is clearly indicated in the resolutions for the boycott of the Whitley Commission, the affiliation of the Congress to the League Against Imperialism and to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, the rejection of the proposal to hold the Asiatic Labour Congress, the refusal to send delegation on behalf of the Indian workers to future sessions of the International Labour Conference at Geneva, the recognition of the Workers' Welfare League, the rejection of the offer from the His Majesty's Government of a Round Table Conference and the condemnation of the Nehru Report.'²⁷ The

statement further alleged that out of a total voting strength of 938 in the Congress, no less than 350 votes belonged to the G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union and the G.K.U., the two unions which were mainly responsible for the adoption of the new policy.

Messrs. Mrinal Kanti Basu and few others submitted a separate statement and seceded from the Trade Union Congress. By issuing a third statement the Indian Seamen's Union, Mariners' Union and Quarter Masters' Union also left the AITUC. All these statements complained of a 'fundamental change' in the policy of the AITUC exhibited by the resolutions of the Executive Council. A tense excitement moved the audience when these statements were read out one after another and everybody felt that at last the split had occurred.

In the open session Mr. S. V. Deshpande formally withdrew the resolution on Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. The set of office-bearers which the executive council had decided for the next term was also modified in the open session. Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose and Mr. Bankim Mukherjee were elected as president and vice-president respectively. Mr. S. V. Deshpande was elected general secretary and Mr. F. J. Ginwala was elected treasurer.

Thus in the tenth session the conflict of two opposing ideological principles culminated into a split of the AITUC.

Specially remarkable was the role played by Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru as the president of this turbulent session. On the whole, his sympathy went with radicals. This happened in spite of the fact that his thinking largely differed from theirs. Pointing out his differences with the communists, in his presidential speech he stated,²⁸ 'With my sympathy for the communist viewpoint, however, I must confess that I do not appreciate many of their methods. The history of past few years in China and elsewhere has shown that these methods have failed and often brought reaction in their train. To affiliate with Third International must mean an adoption of these methods in their entirety. I do not think this is desirable for us and I would therefore respectfully recommend to this Congress not to affiliate itself to either Internationals. This does not mean of course that we should not develop contact with them whenever desirable.'

While favouring a middle road between the two Internationals he spoke, however, justifying the doctrine of class struggle. The sycophants of capitalism of all countries gleefully indulge in a tirade against the communists that it is they who create and rake the fire of class war and destroy the eternal bliss of class peace. Rebuffing this *canard* and the self-approbatory propaganda of the henchmen of capitalism and pointing out that the genesis of class war lay within the womb of the capitalist society itself, Mr. Nehru further stated,²⁹ 'We are often accused of preaching class war and of widening the distance between the classes. The distance is wide enough, thanks to capitalism, and nothing can beat the record of capitalism in this respect. But those who accuse us are singularly unseeing and ignorant of what goes on around them. Is it the socialist or the communist who separates the classes and preaches discontent or the capitalist and imperialist who by his policy and method has reduced the great majority of mankind into wage-slaves who are worse even in many ways than the slaves of old? The class war is none of our creation. It is the creation of capitalism and so long capitalism endures it will endure. For those who are on the top it is easy to ignore it and to preach moderation and goodwill. But the 'goodwill' does not induce these self-proclaimed well-wishers of ours to get off our backs and shoulders. They only shout the louder from the eminence which they have acquired at our cost. The class war has existed and exists today. By trying our ostrich-like to ignore it, we do not get rid of it. Only by our removing the causes we are likely to bring peace.'

In today's context, particularly in the background of Mr. Nehru's later performances, this part of his presidential speech delivered in the Trade Union Congress in 1929 may seem very strange to many and unpalatable and embarrassing to others, yet 'trying ostrich-like to ignore it' would amount to falsifying history.

Mr. Nehru criticized the reformists for the split they caused to the Trade Union Congress. But his criticism was not against reformism as such. He disapproved of the methods the reformists adopted to cause the split. He preferred a middle road for maintaining the unity of the Trade Union Congress. But ultimately all his efforts having met a dismal failure, he came

out openly against those who worked against unity. After a thorough evaluation of the proceedings of this AITUC session, at the end of it he issued a public statement. From a historical point of view, that was a quite significant statement, and so though a little lengthy, the text of that statement is reproduced below. Mr. Nehru stated:³⁰

I had hoped in my presidential address that the threatened split would not occur, but even before I had a chance of delivering address, the cleavage developed and widened as a result of the decision of the Executive Council which met before the open session. I deeply regret that this should have been so, for I realize that our labour movement can ill afford disunity. But perhaps, a split at this stage was inevitable. I have no doubt that the experience and force of circumstance will bring the two together whenever occasion demands. But although the split was likely in any event, there is no doubt that many people actively worked for it and forced the issue. On the one side there was the youthful enthusiasm of some members of the left-wing who wanted to go ahead regardless of consequences, and on the other, the deliberate attempt to push them on so as to widen the breach and thus get additional reasons for seceding.

The seceders did not take part in the open session of the Congress on the ground that the resolutions passed in the Executive Council were bound to be passed in the Congress. They need not have been so hasty in their conclusions or precipitate in their action. It was easy enough for them to withdraw after the Congress has finally decided one way or the other. As a matter of fact, subsequent events showed that, had they attended the Congress, the final decisions might have been different. Even in their absence, one resolution to which they had taken the strongest objection, the Pan-Pacific affiliation, was postponed to next year.

Credentials were accepted at the Congress on behalf of 51 unions representing 189,463 organized workers. According to the Constitution, in a division, voting takes place by unions, and each delegate represents 200 members of the union. There was, thus a total voting strength of 938. One union with a membership of 1,000 was ultimately not represented. This reduced the voting strength to 933. The seceders from the Congress represented thirty unions with a membership of 36,639, and a voting strength of 455. Thus it was clear that the seceders had a majority, and could have, if they had so chosen voted down any and every resolution. But they preferred to keep away.

In the Executive Council, the only resolution that was properly voted upon, was the one on the Whitley Commission boycott. This resolution was passed after prolonged debate by a small majority of 4 votes in a house of 100. After that, it appear-

ed to be the object of some members to vote for resolutions with which they themselves thoroughly disagreed, merely to put the other party in the wrong. Many of the seceders actually voted for the resolution which they protested against in their subsequent statement. This was a strange conduct, and regrettable enough. Equally strange and regrettable was the conduct of some other members who having taken up a brave and even defiant attitude in regard to certain resolutions later thought that discretion was the better part of valour, and quietly withdrew from the Congress and joined the seceders.

I regret the split, but far more, I regret the manner in which it was brought about. I have no doubt that, sooner or later, the real workers of both the wings will join hands. The trouble comes from those who change colour in the course of an afternoon. I am glad to see that the new President of the TUC Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose is already trying to bridge the gulf. I may suggest it might be worthwhile to hold a meeting of the full Executive Council sometimes during the National week in Lahore to discuss the method of future work and common lines of action. One thing I would beg of all my colleagues in the labour movement, and that is to avoid mutual recrimination.

This statement of Mr. Nehru brought to light the tactics the seceders adopted to force a split. Thus after nine years of its founding, in its tenth session the AITUC stood divided. After the split the AITUC was reduced to a body of 21 unions representing a membership of 94,000.

Formation of Indian Trade Union Federation :

After staging a walk-out from the AITUC session, some of the seceders held a separate meeting on 1 December 1929 and decided to form a new organization provisionally called the Indian Trade Union Federation. For this purpose the meeting appointed a provisional committee under the chairmanship of Mr. V. V. Giri and decided to call a convention within three months. It was also decided that the proposed constitution of the new organization 'should contain a clause excluding union and men with communist tendencies, from being affiliated to or represented in the Federation.'

This new federation formed at the initiative of Mr. N. M. Joshi, Mr. Chaman Lall and other noted veterans indicated the emergence and consolidation of an undiluted rightwing ideology in the labour movement of India. Mr. N. M. Joshi was a member of the Servants of India Society and a reformist poli-

tician. His associates Messrs. V. V. Giri, Chaman Lall, B. Shiva Rao and several others, though voiced anti-British sentiments on national-political questions, in the trade union field worked in close connection with the Amsterdam International Federation of Trade Unions and British Trade Union Congress. Further, instead of building up workers' movement at the base, they were very much inclined for co-operation with the government in the matter of official commissions and conferences. By convening the Round Table Conference, the government intended to exercise a softening influence upon the rising tempo of mass movement and in this venture they hoped for support and co-operation from the moderate nationalists, followers of Liberal Federation and other elements like those who offered co-operation with the Simon Commission. And this political wisdom led the British Government to renominate Mr. N. M. Joshi to the Central Legislative Assembly in 1931 and also to invite him to all the three Round Table Conferences in 1930, 1931 and 1932.

This right-wing leadership of Indian labour movement took fright at the militant and uncompromising attitude of the radicals in the AITUC and left the parent body to form a positively rightist organization. This very much pleased the reformist labour organizations of the world. And so it was seen that the British Trade Union Congress and the International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam promptly stepped forward with financial contributions to the tune of Rs. 673-11-0 and Rs. 3,520-3-7 respectively for the establishment of Indian Trade Union Federation. In the first session of this new Federation a resolution was passed thanking these organizations for their generous contributions.³¹ In 1933 Indian Trade Union Federation got formally affiliated with International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam.

Official encouragement behind right-wing activities was no mere accident. Right-wing is born to serve the vested interest and so it did serve the colonial interests of the British imperialists.

Second Split in AITUC—

Formation of Red Trade Union Congress:

The conflict of different counteracting ideological trends

which had been maturing inside AITUC did not come to an end with the split that occurred in the tenth session of AITUC. Though the right-reformists were now out, the other opposing trends inside AITUC continued conflicting instead of being resolved. The forces that were now acting in AITUC were mainly the communists and the radical-nationalists whose political allegiance mostly remained with the Congress. The ideologies of these two sections were distinctly at variance and the conflict of these two trends which now concentrated mainly on the question of an independent political role of the working class, brought about another split in AITUC. The section of the leadership which believed in this revolutionary political doctrine had ultimately to form Red Trade Union Congress outside AITUC.

The eleventh session of AITUC was held at Calcutta on 3-7 July 1931 under the presidency of Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose. The immediate cause of this second split was the dispute about the real representatives of Girni Kamgar Union. In the meeting of the Executive Council on July 3, the dispute assumed very serious proportions. A group led by Mr. G. L. Kandalkar, and another group led by Mr. S. V. Deshpande, general secretary of AITUC made conflicting claims on the right to sit on the general council of the AITUC as representatives of the Girni Kamgar Union. In early 1929, the membership of the union rose up to 65,000 but by the time of this session it came down drastically. The Executive Committee then referred the dispute to a Credential Committee for determining the genuine representation of GKU. But this Credential Committee too was formed by vote and during voting Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose cast two votes—one as a member and the other as president of the Executive Council. The Credential Committee opined in favour of the claim of Mr. Kandalkar's group. When the Executive Council met again on July 5, the president, Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose gave ruling that the report of the Credential Committee should be first taken up for discussion. He further ruled that the Golmuri Tinplate Workers' Union would be represented by a person who bore no credential and was not even a member of the union and he refused to accept the credentials of Mr. Sethi to represent the union though the union secretary had authorized him to do so. He also ruled that the

G.I.P. Railwaymen's union—a communist stronghold—would not be allowed to vote on the question of granting exemption to it from the payment of a part of the affiliation fees—an exemption demanded because this union had just then gone through a big strike which was accompanied by mass victimization and repression. The communists considered the ruling as unjust and biased. The ruling was challenged and Mr. B. T. Ranadive moved a vote of censure on the chair which was lost by 26 to 24 votes. In the confusion and excitement that prevailed at the moment, the president adjourned the meeting of the Executive Council as well as the open session *sine die* which ultimately resulted in splitting the Trade Union Congress.

Mr. S. V. Deshpande and his Marxist followers then held a separate meeting at Metiaburz in the vicinity of Calcutta on July 6. 12 unions, most of which were refused recognition by the Executive Council of AITUC attended this meeting. This meeting gave birth to a new organization—All India Red Trade Union Congress—with Mr. D. B. Kulkarni as president and Messrs. S. V. Deshpande, Bankim Mukherjee and S. G. Sardesai as three general secretaries. Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta was elected treasurer of this organization.

On the other side, the adjourned session of the AITUC was held on July 7, presided over by Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose. In the absence of Mr. S. V. Deshpande, the outgoing general secretary, no Annual Report could be placed in that meeting. But a number of resolutions were adopted. By one resolution, the All India Railwaymen's Federation was requested to adopt a programme of general strike against the massive retrenchment that came down upon the railway workers.

The meeting elected new office-bearers of AITUC. Mr. R. S. Ruikar was elected president and Messrs. G. L. Kandalkar, V. H. Joshi and J. N. Mitra were elected vice-presidents. Mr. Mukundalal Sarkar and Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose were elected general secretary and treasurer respectively.

The Splits—A Critical Review :

After these splits Indian labour movement stood divided into three national centres—the most calamitous setback, the movement had ever encountered. This disunity and cleavage in organization and movement befell the working class at such

a juncture of history when an unprecedented crisis shook the world capitalist economy and its tremors pushed the already tattered colonial economy of India on the verge of destruction. And the formidable type of unemployment, retrenchment, wage-cut and price-rise which this unforeseen crisis had brought in its train threatened to ruin the entire working class. The situation therefore demanded the highest type of organizational unity of the working class for putting up a stiff resistance against this onslaught. But regrettably, just at this crucial moment the unity of the working class stood badly disrupted.

From such a distance of time, it is really difficult to assess the pros and cons of the entire chain of events that led to these splits. Yet from the outline of the whole affair that emerges from the little details of incidents discussed heretofore, certain broad evaluation of the splits with a considerable degree of preciseness does not seem altogether impossible.

The trends of events have shown that the first split was not at all a fortuitous one. The split was prepared by previous developments, by the fact that the trade union movement was outgrowing the economism and indifference to politics. It has already been discussed how the conflict between right-reformism and constitutionalism on the one hand and militant trade unionism based on the doctrine of class struggle on the other was fast approaching towards a total crash. The events have also shown how the right reformists and the constitutionalists within the Indian labour movement had been evincing their interest more on constitutional work, international conferences and co-operation with various commissions and committees set up by the government than on genuinely building up workers' movement. The veteran leadership actually turned into a conglomeration of various reformist elements, career-seeking becoming a creed of life for many of them. Further, it seemed that they were determined to cause a split in AITUC because militant trade union movement was no longer tolerable to them. They found it ruinous to their career-seeking ambition and their pro-government attitude. That the personal factors also played behind the first split was admitted by Mr. Nehru also who presided over the tenth session and was a keen witness to all that took place. In his Autobiography, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru writes,³² "Throughout 1929 Trade Unions in India were agitated over a

new issue—the appointment of a Royal Commission on Labour in India, known as the Whitley Commission. The Left wing was in favour of a boycott of the Commission, the Right wing in favour of co-operation, and the personal factor came in as some of the Right Wing leaders were offered membership of the Commission. In this matter, as in many others, my sympathies were with the left, especially as this was also the policy of the National Congress. It seemed absurd to co-operate with official commission when we were carrying on, or going to carry on, a direct action struggle.’

So, the right-reformists wanted to co-operate with an official commission when the national struggle was poised for a direct action.

Reviewing the incidents leading to the split Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose who took a leading role in the tenth session of AITUC also writes, ‘if the Right Wingers had not seceded from the Trade Union Congress at Nagpur, they would still have played an important role. *But they would have to suffer one disadvantage—which probably they were not prepared to do—namely, to forgo the annual trip to Geneva on the occasion of the International Labour Conference* (emphasis added). The Trade Union Congress passed a resolution boycotting the International Labour Conference at Geneva because the conference had been of little help to the Indian workers and the Indian representatives to that conference were appointed by the Government of India and not by the All India Trade Union Congress. This resolution, like the one boycotting the Whitley Commission, was unacceptable to the Right Wingers and proved to be the proverbial last straw’.³³

Besides betraying these personal ambitions, the seceders also went to the length of adopting unfair tactics to force the split. The radicals on the other side, to some extent fell victim to the splitting tactics of the right-reformists. It was not that the split could have been avoided, but they ought to have been more cautious so as not to allow the seceders any pretext, the Pan-Pacific resolution which they ultimately withdrew was a case in point. The scheming seceders, however, made it appear as if they were seceding because some resolutions affiliating the AITUC to International anti-imperialist organizations in which communists participated were passed. But the resolutions could

not have been passed by majority in the Executive Council had the Right-wing itself not voted for them. But the Right-wing wanted to secede anyhow after the resolution on boycotting the Whitley Commission was passed, they therefore voted for the resolutions to which they were opposed in order to propagate that the communists had captured the Trade Union Congress. As earlier noted, Mr. Nehru in his statement criticized this unscrupulous role of the Rightists. Anyway, it must be admitted that it was the Left-wing which was the real repository of the revolutionary spirit of the Indian working-class movement. Their youthful exuberance might have been exploited to some extent in favour of the seceders' design, but that was altogether a different matter.

The second split, in one sense, was more deplorable than the first one. The first one was the result of a conflict between the Right-wing and the Left-wing, while the second was the most lamentable result of conflict within the Left-wing itself. Broadly, this was a conflict between the adherents of Marxism, who were thoroughly revolutionary and believed in the vanguard rôle of the working class in political action and the left-nationalists—who although militant in outlook were completely under the bourgeois-nationalist spell of Indian National Congress.

The Nagpur session elected Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose as the president and there was then a strong nationalist wing owing allegiance to the National Congress. This was the time when on the one hand the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed and the civil disobedience movement was withdrawn, and on the other, the communist leaders continued to rot in jail in Meerut and Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries were hanged. When the communists criticized this sham compromise and tried to rouse the workers to its dangers, Mr. Subhas Bose and other nationalist elements strongly resented it as they did not want any one in the AITUC to go beyond the policies sanctioned by the Congress. It was an open attempt to make the AITUC an appendage of the Congress and a clash was inevitable as the nationalists wanted to stifle all independent criticism of AITUC.

But there were other special features of the situation which ultimately forced the split.

Firstly, the trade unions led by the communists and even

other leftists were by and large suppressed in one strike after another during the course of the economic crisis.

Secondly, in the period 1930-31, the communists were guided by a sectarian political understanding which isolated the Communist Party even from its former trade union following. The communists on the spot were, however, only partially responsible for that isolation as most of the policy decisions of this period were made directly by the Communist International. Even the efforts to reunite the GKU in Bombay were criticized in the Communist International Press as opportunism. It was only two years after the Calcutta session that emphasis was laid on trade union unity.

Thirdly, there was a systematic attempt to slander and isolate the communists and take away the trade unions from them, especially in Bombay and elsewhere. The lead in this attempt was taken by the group of Mr. M. N. Roy who were bent upon disrupting the trade union movement, completely identifying themselves with the Congress. They exploited the bourgeois-nationalist illusion of the workers, and demanded that everyone in the union must fall in line with them. The communists and young proletarian elements of India, especially in Bombay had to carry on a stiff ideological fight against their anti-working class line of action. Simultaneously, they had also to courageously face the aggressive designs of the Congress followers in order to defend the trade unions under their control.

This was the political background to the second split. Both wings were weak, but the Royists and the nationalists together were determined to drive the communists out. For that purpose they tried to install themselves as the majority by any means, by reducing the representation and strength of the Left unions led by the communists or their supporters. The rôle of Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose as the president of the session, particularly his tackling the battle that started on the question of representation in the key committee—the Credential Committee, was not beyond question. His action in giving vote twice—one as an ordinary member and then securing a majority to his side by giving casting vote as president revealed only the determination of the nationalists to precipitate a crisis.

The Royists were at the root of the mischief because they wanted their GKU in Bombay to be recognized and the com-

munist-led GKU to be thrown out. They were not interested in any compromise and the communists on their part, could think of none—none could think of suggesting the acceptance of both unions. All these factors led to the catastrophe without any attempt to avert it.

The next phase of the Indian labour movement was, however, marked with the redeeming feature of an all-out effort to restore unity.

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STRUGGLES DURING WORLD ECONOMIC CRISIS 1931-36

World Economic Crisis :

The stabilization which world capitalism attained during 1924-28 was actually of a precarious nature. It was soon coming to an end and the grim shadow of crisis loomed ahead.

In the autumn of 1929 the U.S.A. was seized with a stock-market panic of unprecedented magnitude. The financial and banking crash, which spread to other countries, was the first symptom of the world economic crisis.

This crisis which gripped the capitalist world during 1929-33 was the most profound and destructive of all the economic crisis capitalism had ever known. It dealt a shattering blow to the economy, the political foundation and ideology of the bourgeoisie and in total effect it further aggravated the general crisis of capitalism.

Industry, agriculture, the banking and financial system, internal as well as international trade—in a word, all aspects of the capitalist economy were affected by this crisis. The production of the capitalist world which had risen to high level exhibited a downward trend. By 1932 capitalist economy reached an all time low. During 1930-33 the industrial output in the capitalist world shrank as much as by 38 per cent.

This industrial crisis was accompanied with an equally serious agrarian crisis and the net effect was an intensification of the struggle for markets among the imperialist countries. The Treaty of Versailles and similar other international agreements began to be cynically disregarded and manifestation of an all round crisis in the capitalist world began to be more and more distinct.

The common masses of the capitalist countries happened to be the worst victims of this world economic crisis. The

bourgeoisie tried to shift all burdens of the crisis on to the shoulders of the working class and thus they suffered doubly from the steady decline in wages and mass retrenchment. Unemployment assumed unheard of dimensions.

This alarming deterioration in the conditions of the proletariat and the middle-classes in the capitalist countries led to an intensification of the class struggle which was evidenced in the high rate of strike-actions taking place during the period. Nearly 19,000 strikes involving 8,500,000 workers occurred during 1929-32 in 15 of the world's largest countries.¹

Against the background of this crisis which was rocking the entire capitalist world, most impressive was the high rate of development of Soviet economy. Soviet Union during the period successfully completed the First Five Year Plan. While industrial output of capitalism was on the downgrade, Soviet Union was making tremendous progress along the road of industrialization. The contrast between the performance of capitalism and that of Soviet economy during this period sharply pointed out the superiority of socialism not merely in theory but in practical deeds.

Rise of Fascism and Anti-Fascist Struggle :

The mounting revolutionary struggle of the toiling masses was confronted with a hardened and furious resistance on the part of the exploiting classes, who tried to establish totalitarian regimes and strangle at birth every display of discontent on the part of the masses. This found political expression in Fascism, which rapidly gained ground and became the rallying point of the imperialist bourgeoisie in many countries. It indicated the trend of the monopoly bourgeoisie towards the worst forms of reaction and to a final attempt to defeat the working-class revolution by having recourse to brute force and political adventurism. This led to a gradual fascistisation of the bourgeois regimes in many countries and the rapid growth of fascist parties.

Thus in the year of the world economic crisis, fascism appeared as the most anti-popular and anti-humanist force and it assumed threatening dimensions in Germany early in the thirties.

The Social-Democracy committed to a policy of class colla-

boration with the bourgeoisie urged the working class to see the crisis through, to consent to make sacrifices and to lose a number of gains in order to avoid a civil war. The class collaborationist and surrenderist role of the leaders of Social-Democracy, on the one hand gave a phillip to the onset of fascism and on the other deepened the split in the working class and weakened it in the face of aggressive reaction.

In Germany where imperialist reaction saw in fascism an opportunity of crushing the proletariat by means of terror, the German Social Democratic Party again and again spurned off the proposals of the German Communist Party for united action to forestall the danger of fascism. Thanks to the role of Social-Democracy the working class of Germany instead of being able to close up its ranks and strengthen itself stood badly divided and organizationally disarmed in the face of fascist terror. Had the social-democrats agreed to a joint action with the communists against fascism, the history of Germany might have taken a different course.

Italy had already come under the grip of fascism and now besides Germany, the fascist movement made headway noticeably in France, Austria, Spain, Greece and the Baltic States.

The onset of fascism, the main political strike-force of monopoly capital thus substantially altered the entire world situation.

But reaction and fascism, by attacking the democratic freedom and rights of the masses, engendered in them a growing urge to fight for their freedom and rights. The fascist onslaught on the German working class, agricultural labourers and the progressive intelligentsia served as an eye-opener to the revolutionary working class and progressive minded people the world over. 'As with the medieval serfs, the workers in Hitler's Germany found themselves being more and more bound to their place of labour, though it was not the employer who bound them but the State. . . . likewise the agricultural labour by law, was attached to the land and forbidden to leave it for work in the city'.²

In the midst of this grave danger, the Seventh Congress of the Communist International held in 1935 called upon the international working class to build up united action to resist fascism. In the workers' urge towards unity of action the communists saw not only a defensive reaction to the attack of the fascist

gangs, but the embryo of militant unity of the workers for their coming counter-offensive.

Dealing with the questions how could fascism be prevented from coming to power and how could fascism be overthrown after it had been victorious, Georgi Dimitrov in his report to the Seventh Congress said, *'The first thing that must be done, the thing with which to commence, is to form united front, to establish unity of action of the workers in every factory, in every district, in every region, in every country, all over the world.'* He further said, *'Unity of action of the proletariat on a national and international scale is the mighty weapon which renders the working class capable not only of successful defence but also of successful counter-offensive against fascism, against the class enemy.'*⁷³

But joint action with the Social-Democratic Parties and Organizations did not preclude, on the contrary, *rendered still more necessary* the serious and well-founded criticism of reformism, of Social-Democracy as the ideology and practice of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie. Elaborating this aspect of joint action, the Resolution on the Report of Georgi Dimitrov adopted by the Communist International further pointed out, *'While revealing to the masses the meaning of the demagogic arguments, advanced by the Right Social-Democratic leaders against the united front, while intensifying the struggle against the reactionary section of Social-Democracy the Communists must establish the closest co-operation with those Left Social-Democratic workers, functionaries and organizations that fight against the reformist policy and advocate a United front with the Communist Party.'*⁷⁴

Communist International simultaneously emphasized the necessity of building up united movement on the day-to-day problems of the working class and on their practical demands and pointed out that it was through a broad united action on the basis of common and partial demands that would enable the working class to defeat fascism and march ahead for a greater and revolutionary objective.

Surging Mass Struggle and Retreat of National Congress :

Attainment of complete national independence—that was the goal set by the National Congress in Lahore Session in 1929.

But the uprisings of the Indian people that began to spurt out in various parts of the country far transcended the scheme of things of Gandhiji and the National Congress. The people began to sort out their own path and act accordingly without waiting for any signal either from Gandhiji or from the Congress. Along with these revolutionary uprisings, the refusal of the Garhwali soldiers at Peshwar to shoot down the people bore the highest significance for the whole future of India's liberation struggle. The Hindu Garhwali soldiers not only defied the orders of the army authority to fire on the Muslim demonstrators, but broke ranks and fraternised with the crowd. The situation took so serious a turn that the troops had to be withdrawn from Peshwar and the city went completely in the hands of the people from April 25 to May 4 of the year 1930. These soldier-patriots had to pay the price for their patriotism, they were put to court-martial and savage sentences were passed on them.

In May of the same year an anti-imperialist armed revolt led by the eminent terrorist leader Surya Sen broke out in Chittagong rocking the entire province of Bengal and in the same month following the arrest of Gandhiji the workers and other toiling masses of the big industrial centre of Sholapur in Bombay Presidency rose to a militant struggle, drove the British officers and the local police out of the city, set up organs of revolutionary self-government and fought sanguinary battles with the troops lasting for several days.

These bloody revolts together with the workers' demonstrations in Bengal and Bombay, no-tax movement of the peasants or in other words, the countrywide revolutionary upsurge—struck the imperialists with grave alarm and at the same time totally upset the political calculations of Gandhiji and the Congress leadership.

The refusal of the Garhwali soldiers to shoot at their fellow-countrymen, the memory of which will ever live in the hearts of the Indian people as a triumphant demonstration of true patriotism, met Gandhiji's disapproval. He publicly condemned these Garhwali heroes. 'A soldier who disobeys an order to fire' he said, 'breaks the oath which he has taken and renders himself guilty of criminal disobedience'.⁵

That was a great moment in Indian history. The heightened

state of national and mass feelings offered at that moment a reasonable chance of speedily mobilizing the masses, isolating the imperialists and striding fast ahead to win independence.

But this course was fundamentally at variance with what Gandhiji and the Congress leadership conceived of. All these developments confronted Gandhiji with the difficult and ticklish problems—how to forestall this revolutionary advance. So in order to maintain the leadership of the Indian bourgeoisie over the anti-imperialist movement unharmed and at the same time to exercise maximum bounds and restraints upon the rising mass struggle, Gandhiji thought out a skilful and able strategy. His new plan of action precluded the possibility of participation by the toiling masses, the industrial working class in particular.

So followed the much-publicized Salt March to Dandi on the seashore—a dexterously chalked out programme within the confines of the most limited and harmless form of civil disobedience. But when on April 6 Gandhiji and his selected followers performed the ceremonial boiling of salt, the masses of Indian people who were called on to keep awaiting on the spectators' gallery during the entire show broke loose throughout the country. An overwhelming mass movement took the both sides by surprise. Gandhiji's vision of Salt Satyagraha was of a very restricted form of civil disobedience placing maximum control on the masses while the government 'considered the movement a mad venture on the part of crazy visionary', which they fondly believed 'would fall completely flat and either Gandhiji would have to recall it or it would die of ennui . . .'.⁶

But the masses put all these calculations into a total disorder.

Alarmed at this unbridled mass upsurge, the colonial government took recourse to cruel repressive measures. Lathi-charge and firing by the police and troops went rampant besides thousands of patriots being thrown into the gaol. A confounded Gandhi was arrested too on May 5.

Again the masses moved. At a time when the anti-imperialist emotion of the masses was running high, the arrest of Gandhiji further incensed them to militant protest actions. Like a tidal bore waves of *hartals* and working-class strikes flushed the entire country. The most militant and glorious political

action was the uprising of the working class of Sholapur already referred to, but here again the method chosen by the people to protest government's action was against the political ethics of Gandhiji.

The imperialists ran amuck at this behaviour of the masses. Unbounded repression was let loose. Draconian ordinances followed in quick succession as if the government was facing a military situation. According to official records 60,000 people were detained, but the actual figure was obviously higher and the National Congress estimated it to be a total of 90,000 men, women and children.

As usual with the shrewd imperialist politicians, accompanying this repression the British Government threw a bait of concession. The report of the Simon Commission was published in the middle of 1930 and in November the British Premier Mr. Ramsay MacDonald convened Round Table Conference at London for establishing 'responsible self-government' in India. Befitting the mood of the masses National Congress boycotted the Conference.

On 26 January 1931 Gandhiji and other members of the Congress Working Committee were released. Prolonged negotiation then followed between Gandhiji and the Viceroy Lord Irwin. On March 5, Gandhi-Irwin Agreement was signed and the Congress declared the struggle provisionally suspended.

But the government went ahead with repression in spite of this Agreement. Those arrested under Special Ordinance were not released. Gandhiji did not even insist on the release of the convicted prisoners of Meerut Conspiracy Case. In spite of a countrywide demand, the death sentence passed on the great terrorist leader Bhagat Singh was not set aside. On the contrary, signing of the Pact was immediately followed by the execution of Bhagat Singh on March 23. So even the Congress Working Committee was on the verge of a division on the question of this Agreement and Gandhiji had to labour hard to put the things in order. And in a hurriedly summoned session of the Congress on March 31 at Karachi, the Agreement was got ratified. The advance of the left-wing force within the Congress, which marked the Lahore session greatly influencing its decisions, was thus given a backward push in Karachi session. Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru was afflicted with 'mental conflict and

physical distress', Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose was sharply critical, but all in vain. Through this session Congress was pushed back to the compromising position of the earlier two sessions and Gandhiji emerged all-powerful.

Gandhiji joined the Second Round Table Conference in London held during September to December 1931 as the sole representative of Congress. Adorned by a motley crowd of puppets of the British Government hand-picked from India, the Conference proved a farce. Mr. McDonald declared the government's intention of implementing the Government of India Act and introducing Federal Centre with Provincial Autonomy in accordance thereof. The question of independence for which the people fought so gallantly was altogether shelved.

The agreements and conferences, however, did not deter the government from having recourse to suppressive measures. During 1932-33 about 120,000 freedom-fighters were thrown behind the bars, which fact itself proved the unabated movement of the masses despite its official suspension through Pacts. The sense of deception which the Agreement and the Round Table Conference engendered in the masses led to another spurt of terroristic activities in Bengal. In May 1933 while in prison, Gandhiji undertook a fast, not against the government, but for purification of himself and his associates with the purpose of a greater devotion to *Harijan* problem. Gandhiji was released immediately. He then issued a statement recommending that the Congress should suspend civil disobedience temporarily. One year later in April 1934 the movement was finally abandoned.

While the Congress leadership was thus beating a retreat, a totally discordant note was struck at the sessions of the All India Workers' and Peasants' Party and All India Youth League held at Karachi. The former adopted a programme on labour and the peasant questions which went far ahead of the Congress Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy. The latter called for continuation of the fight for complete independence. The sessions condemned the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Congress decision to participate in the second Round Table Conference.

Meanwhile, third Round Table Conference was convened in London in November 1932. Congress decided not to attend. The discussion at the Conference attended by some puppets

led to the decision of the British Government to pass the Government of India Act 1935 proposing some reforms in the form of a federal government at the centre and provincial governments—with some measure of autonomy. But even to Congress this Act of 1935 was 'totally disappointing'. Independence was a far cry. Ministers elected on restricted franchise were injected into the British administration of India, while foreign rule was to continue.

The official ban on National Congress was withdrawn in June 1934 but immediately followed the ban on the Communist Party of India on July 23. Under the provisions of Special (Emergency) Powers Act several Communist leaders were detained.

In accordance with the provisions of the new Act of 1935, National Congress participated in provincial elections and received tremendous mass support. Besides Bengal and the Punjab, Congress formed ministries in seven provinces, and entered into coalition ministries in two more. Only in Bengal and the Punjab non-Congress ministries were formed.

It was now a new stage. In the autumn of 1934 Gandhiji resigned from the membership of Congress as according to him the majority of the Congressmen accepted non-violence only as a policy and not as a fundamental creed.

Lahore Congress in 1929 adopted resolution demanding complete independence, three to four years thence witnessed gallant struggles of the masses for that goal, now a pact was signed and that goal was shelved, civil disobedience was suspended and this was the appropriate moment for Gandhiji to resign and move behind the screen. Obviously it was not a permanent retirement, but keeping himself ready for any need in case of crisis and so he appeared again in 1939-40 and 1942 and assumed the leadership.

The tide of mass struggle that was set in motion in 1930-31 was irresistible, it could not be halted midway. Now the working class too was joining in masses lending it a militant character. Within the next decade the anti-imperialist upsurge of the masses and the working class succeeded in completely shaking the foundation of the British administration.

Condition of the Working Class During World Economic Crisis :

The world economic depression had fatal repercussions on the colonial economy of India. India's economy where eighty per cent of the people were dependent on agriculture came to a breaking point due to sharp fall in agricultural prices. The plight of the peasantry was beyond imagination, their purchasing power came down at the lowest limit.

Designing to shift the burden of the crisis on to the shoulders of the people, the British Government introduced a variety of prejudicial economic measures. The discriminatory policy which they had adopted through Imperial Preference was extended to the Indian steel and textile industries also. And ignoring the strong protest voiced in Central Legislative Assembly, the British Government signed Ottawa Trade Agreement dragging the Indian economy to a still worse position.

The cotton-textile industry of India was faced with a severe recession. And the Indian capitalists, in a bid to shift all burdens on to the workers, resorted to mass retrenchment. Through schemes of rationalization already before the onset of world depression, they had reduced ten thousand workers out of a total number of 140,000. workers in the textile industry of Bombay. Now again many mills reduced working hours and many closed down. In 1934 about fifty per cent of the textile mills of Bombay closed down and 61,000 workers lost their jobs.⁷ Wage-cut was added to it. Starting with a wage-cut in certain mills in May 1931, wages of the workers of as many as 42 mills were reduced by April 1934. In consequence, in December 1933 and in April 1934 wages registered a fall respectively by 16.94 per cent and 21 per cent with 1926 as the base.⁸ This encouraged the mill-owners of Ahmedabad also to reduce wages of the workers by 20 per cent and this set a pattern in the textile industry in other centres as well where too wages were drastically reduced. The reduction amounted to 15 per cent at Madras, 12½ per cent at Sholapur, 20 per cent at Nagpur and 25 per cent at Akola and one or two more centres.⁹

Similar onslaughts came down upon the jute mill workers of Bengal. While the Whitley Commission estimated a number of 347,000 jute workers as existing in 1929, the statistics published by the Government of India in 1934 indicated the num-

ber of jute workers as 263,739 only, the difference between these two estimates being as large as 83,000. In fact this 83,000 was the number of jute workers who were retrenched during the five years between 1929 and 1934. Simultaneously, by introducing one-shift system in place of two-shift in different mills, 25 to 33 per cent of the workers were further reduced.¹⁰

Their wages too were reduced. Already in 1931 *Amrita Bazar Patrika* forebode the impending onslaught on the jute workers. The *Patrika* wrote,¹¹ 'The situation in regard to the workers in the Jute Mills due to certain measures that the Jute Mills have taken or are about to take is very serious. There is a slump in the trade and the mills propose to effect reduction in their labour force to an extent that will throw out of employment 40,000 workers from about 62 mills. Thanks to the complicated system of wages that the mills have introduced, the reduction of hands by itself does not indicate the extent of mischief. Forty thousand persons men and women, will lose their jobs. Will those who remain continue to receive the former wages? No, here also the mills by certain devices, propose to make the weavers of hessians work the same amount as before but pay them less. . . .' This foreboding came to be true. While the monthly wages of a spinner in 1928-29 amounted to Rs. 6 to 7, in 1935-36 the same were reduced to Rs. 5 to 6. Between the same periods, the monthly wages of weaver came down from Rs. 10 to 12 to Rs. 7 to 9. The wages of an unskilled labourer which were between Rs. 7 and Rs. 8 came down to Rs. 2 to 7. In spite of commanding a world-wide monopoly, during the world depression the owners of the jute industry thus drastically reduced the workers' wages for 'earning a reasonable profit', as they justified it.

Mass retrenchment began in the Indian railways too. During 1930-31 the total number of workers in the railways stood at 781,859 which during the next financial year came down to 730,290. This meant a reduction of 51,569 workers.¹² This mass retrenchment was, however, preceded by local retrenchments of a good number of workers of the railway workshops at Kharagpur, Liluah, Golden Rock, Parel and Ajmer. These retrenchments were effected in characteristically colonial way. While the workers at the lower rung were retrenched the fat-salaried European officers at the top remained untouched.

Pointing out this discrimination *Amrita Bazar Patrika* wrote,¹³ 'Retrenchment in the Indian Railways has begun in a drastic fashion. But the tragedy of it is that the axe is being laid not on the fat-salaried white skinned officers but on the poorly paid Indian employees. . . . Sacrificing poor Indian employees at the altar of the higher grade officers is a mere apology for retrenchment.' The *Patrika* then urged, 'We hope the All India Railway-men's Federation which is meeting in Bombay will take up the matter in right earnest.'

Simultaneous with the retrenchment, the wages of the employees and workers in the Railways and Posts and Telegraph Department were compulsorily reduced under the Emergency Reduction Rule 1931. The wages of other categories of government employees too were reduced. Here too the same discrimination was practised. Referring to this *Amrita Bazar Patrika* pungently wrote,¹⁴ 'There is a great flutter in clerkdom at Delhi. The rumour is current that an I.C.S. officer in the Finance Department, whose retirement by the by is overdue, is busy preparing a scheme of cutting down the salary of all government servants except, of course, the members of the heaven-born services, namely the I.C.S. and the Indian Police Service and other highly placed non-Indian officers. So, if revenues have come down it is the poor clerks who must be made to suffer and not the members of the most extravagantly paid services with which India has been saddled.'

Workers of all categories were hit. At the Tata Iron and Steel Works at Jamshedpur, the wages of the workers were reduced from monthly Rs. 35.35 to Rs. 29.79 between the years 1929 and 1932. According to Whitley Commission's report, the wages of the Dock Workers at Bombay ranged from 14 annas to Rs. 1-8-0, at Karachi the same were Rs. 1-2-0 for male workers and 13 annas for the female workers. Even these meagre wages faced a reduction by 30 to 40 per cent. Moreover, the labourers did not get work for more than 10 to 12 days a month.

The municipal workers too were faced with retrenchment and wage-cut. At Kanpur the wages of the workers in 1935 were reduced by 40 per cent in relation to that of 1921.

In sum, the grave depression of 1930-34 severely hit the entire working class of India. The workers were faced with both the dangers of retrenchment and wage-cut.

This large-scale retrenchment of the workers and total absence of any new avenue for employment resulted in an unemployment problem of formidable dimensions. Many frustrated and disappointed youths even committed suicide. This was what the colonial rule brought for the youths of India.

Economic Struggle of the Working Class against Crisis :

The necessity of building up stiff resistance against this formidable economic crisis and its ruinous effect upon the working class was strongly felt. In spite of a considerable amount of organizational disunity prevailing at the time, the working class waged economic struggles against this crisis. But largely due to disunity, the struggle could not be as extensive and stormy as the situation really warranted. There was another important factor too. The anti-imperialist movement of the period stimulated and involved the working class of the country to such a dimension and political struggle got precedence over economic struggle to such an extent that it was not also possible for the working class to pay sufficient attention to their day to day economic problems. This period was particularly marked by the glorious role of the working class in the anti-imperialist political upsurge that swept the country.

But in spite of deep involvement in political struggles, the economic struggles of the working class were, on the whole, steadily mounting. The number of labour disputes rising to 148 in the year 1930 and to 166 in the year 1931 from a number of 141 in the year 1929 indicates the increasing order of these struggles. The following table gives a picture of the labour disputes that took place between 1931 and 1936.

Labour Disputes
1931-1936

Year	No. of Disputes	No. of Workers involved	No. of Working days lost
1931	... 166	203,008	2,408,123
1932	... 118	128,099	1,922,437
1933	... 146	164,938	2,168,961
1934	... 159	220,808	4,775,559
1935	... 145	114,217	973,457
1936	... 157	169,029	2,358,662

The most remarkable strike of the year 1931 was that which occurred in Hastings Jute Mill in Bengal. 5,300 workers participated in this strike resulting in a loss of 217,323 working days. Another remarkable industrial action of this year occurred in Sholapur Cotton Mills of Bombay Presidency where 15,000 workers struck work for three weeks on the demands of enhanced rate of dearness allowance and recognition of the union. Strikes occurred in the Cotton Mills of Madurai and in the Kurla Swadeshi Mill. A total of 25,800 workers participated in these three strikes and in consequence 673,000 working days were lost. On a scrutiny of the strikes of this year it appears that most of these occurred in the jute and cotton textile mills. These two industries claimed a number of 98 strikes which constituted 67 per cent of the total strikes of the year in all industries.

In 1932 the most serious strikes took place in the railway workshops and in the jute mills of Bengal.

In October of that year strike began at Madras and at the workshops of Perambur, Arkonam and Hoobly of Southern Mahratta Railway against retrenchment. 8,300 workers joined this strike and a total of 440,000 working days were lost in consequence thereof. Lasting for ten weeks this strike came to an end in January 1933. A further number of 55,000 working days were lost in January 1933 due to this strike. A citizens' committee formed at the initiative of the Sheriff of Madras tried for a settlement of the strike and accordingly an agreement was signed on 7 January 1933. The strike was called off thereafter. But the agreement allowed retrenchment of 370 workers. Even the general secretary of the union was dismissed from service subsequently.

It is worth-mentioning in this connection that the All India Railwaymen's Federation in its meeting held at Ajmir on 15 March 1931 discussed the problem of large-scale retrenchment on the railways. That meeting urged the government to refrain from the contemplated retrenchment pending a thorough investigation into the problem. Meanwhile, of course, within a year between March 1930 and March 1931 as many as 40,502 workers out of total strength of 728,821 were already retrenched and another batch of 8,392 were demoted.

A prolonged correspondence with the All India Railwaymen's Federation combined with a threat of general strike by

the railway workers ultimately led the Government of India to appoint a Court of Inquiry to go into the question of retrenchment. The Federation, however, demanded appointment of an Arbitration Board which was not conceded by the government. Commenting upon this Mr. Shiva Rao said,¹⁵ '... it is doubtful if the Railway Board would have felt compelled to appoint in 1931 a Court of Enquiry, but for the threatening attitude of the railway workers which might have led to stoppage of work on at least some of the most important railway lines in India. It was until the Federation commenced taking a ballot, preliminary to the declaration of a general strike that the Railway Board was induced to agree to this step.'

But subsequently instead of going into the main question of stopping retrenchment, the Court of Inquiry recommended formation of some sort of committee for administering group retrenchment on the railways.

The attitude shown by the government in this connection proved beyond doubt that the main purpose of the officially appointed committees and commissions was not to settle the workers' problems but to forestall their impending struggles. Even a reformist leader like Mr. V. V. Giri, general secretary of the All India Railwaymen's Federation was constrained to observe that the government instituted this machinery 'only to prevent a successful strike and nothing more and nothing less.'

Besides the strike on the railways, the workers of four jute mills of Bengal namely, Kelvin, Standard, Kinison and Howrah struck work against ten per cent wage-cut. These strikes involved 19,000 workers and caused a loss of 331,000 working days.

In 1932, 60 per cent of the strikes occurred on the question of wages setting the highest record of such disputes since 1921.

Situation further worsened since 1933. The average daily numbers of workers employed in the industries of India recorded a fall of about 16,500. Worst affected were the cotton-textile mills of Bombay. Besides this reduction, a good number of workers were employed partially who did not get work more than 14 days a month. The workers further suffered from a loss of wages due to enforcement of Factory Act 1934 reducing the weekly working hours from 60 to 54 without any corresponding safeguard of the workers' wages.

In the same year the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners' Association proposed a 25 per cent cut in wages of the workers.

The cumbersome machinery for compulsory arbitration introduced in Ahmedabad by Gandhiji led to a prolonged negotiation between the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners' Association and Majoor Mahajan on the issue of this wage-cut. Meanwhile, the workers growing impatient for a general strike in the textile industry, an agreement was ultimately signed by Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda, secretary of Majoor Mahajan and Mr. G. I. Patel, Secretary of the Ahmedabad Mill-Owners' Association in January 1935. The agreement stipulated a reduction of the workers' wages as well as rationalization of the industry subject to certain restrictions. Among other items the Agreement included that,¹⁶ (1) Increase of wages granted in 1930 would be withdrawn amounting to uniform cut of six and a quarter per cent subject to the condition that reduction be so applied as not to bring down earnings of the weavers below Rs. 41-4 or twenty-six working days on ten hour basis, (2) Rationalization be carried out under certain restrictions relating to unemployment and its effect on the health of workers.

This bi-partite Agreement was later ratified by the Umpire. Knowing that this Agreement admitting wage-cut would cause deep resentment among the workers, Gandhiji addressed a personal letter to the workers advising them to accept the wage-cut 'cheerfully'. This letter has an important bearing in the history of Indian labour as it excellently unfolds the philosophy of Gandhian reformism and the extent up to which this philosophy can go in a dispute between Capital and Labour. The following is the full text of the letter:¹⁷

I hope you will welcome the settlement which has been reached regarding the dispute on the question of your wages and cheerfully accept the reduction which has been agreed to on your behalf. I have not the least doubt that it will be in your interests to do so and thereby your prestige will be enhanced. It is a matter of no small consequence that the settlement secures acceptance of the basic principle of the policy of adoption which has been our aim for years past. It now remains to devise a scheme to work them out as early as possible. There is no need to explain that their successful application depends to a large extent on your sincerity of purpose and your conduct. For, one who remembers that interests of both the mill-owners and the workers are bound up with the maintenance of the industry there should not be the slightest difficulty in

seeing merits of the settlement. I have been telling you ever since we came together that the industry is not exclusively for the mill-owners. The mill-owners have invested their capital, your capital is your labour. Either would be worthless without the other. If you have imbibed this truth, you will recognize that the settlement safeguards the interests of both the parties. You will also see that we have covered a considerable ground and are so much nearer to realization of the dream we have been cherishing. Hence my hope is that you will give unanimous approval to the settlement.

No big strike occurred during this year. But the workers participated in many partial and small strikes. Cunningly the owners brought down on the workers retrenchment, wage-cut and other onslaughts not all at a time and in the entire industry, but they did it separately in individual mills and at different intervals of time. These put the workers in a disadvantageous position in respect of organizing resistance. In fact the strikes which occurred during 1931 to 1935 were of sporadic nature having no consistent connection between one and the other.

In 1934 the number of strikes considerably increased and involvement of the workers almost doubled. The general strike of the textile workers was the principal working-class action of this year. The strikes of the Dock workers of Bombay and Calcutta were also of sufficient importance.

The textile workers struck work mainly against wage-cut and retrenchment. The workers in the textile mills of Sholapur went on strike against a 12½ per cent cut in wages. The strike lasted from February 1934 to May 1934 resulting in a loss of 460,000 working days. At Nagpur also 60,000 textile workers participated in a strike organized by the Nagpur Textile Union against wage-cut which lasted from May 1934 to July 1934.

But in the city of Bombay the textile workers' strike was much more extensive. The strike involved 90,000 workers and claimed more than fifty per cent of the total working days lost during that year. This strike was conducted against direct wage-cut and indirect wage-cut through rationalization. This strike was led by a 'Council of Action' consisting of both the militant communists and the moderate reformists.

The above strikes were waged in accordance with the decision of the All India Textile Workers' Conference held at Kanpur in 1933. Although the conference decided to organize strike throughout the country and a 'Council of Action' was also formed

for that purpose, in actual practice the strikes were confined within Bombay, Nagpur and Sholapur.

At the beginning Mr. N. M. Joshi, Mr. R. R. Bakhale and other reformist leaders were against the strike. For mitigating the workers' plight a prayer for official intervention was more advisable to them than organizing a strike. But subsequently the militant mood of the workers led them to agree to a strike on certain conditions and accordingly they joined the United Strike Committee. But still these reformist leaders made all attempts to stay the hands of the workers while the communists and other militant elements seriously organized the strike and started campaigning to extend it to other centres besides Bombay. Meanwhile, the conditions proposed by the reformist leaders not being accepted by the United Strike Committee, a rival Committee was formed at the initiative of Messrs. Kandalkar, Alve, Moniben Kara and other reformist leaders. Batatawala Building Girni Kamgar Union, a parallel body to the Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag) also joined that rival Strike Committee. These incidents came out as a serious blow to the prospect of developing a united struggle of the workers against the offensive of the capitalists and the disunity that prevailed acted as a major impediment to the advance of the strike that had begun meanwhile.

The strike in Bombay began in a highly organized manner. The new scenes that specially marked the strike were the picketings of the mill-gates by the women workers. Besides mass picketing, regular meetings, demonstrations and other mass activities greatly enlivened the strike. But from the very outset, the government heavily came down upon the strike. Prohibitory orders were issued against holding of meetings and demonstrations. A number of leaders of the movement were arrested and in one case the police resorted to firing. Simultaneously the owners and the government made common cause to induct blacklegs to break the strike. The previous effect of mass unemployment created by the world economic crisis was amply demonstrated during the strike. Instead of taking steps to eradicate the menace of unemployment, the colonial government dragged the unemployed youths to the immoral path of blacklegging.

The workers involved in a bitter class-struggle against the

capitalist onslaughts of wage-cut and retrenchment were not, however, oblivious of the grave political situation that developed in the country as a sequel to the world economic crisis and brutal repressive policies of the imperialist government. The workers, on the contrary, in addition to their economic issues from the very beginning raised the demands of repeal of all anti-labour repressive Acts, release of all political prisoners and tried to transform this strike into a political struggle both for economic and political demands. The streets of Bombay were converted into scenes of daily demonstration by the workers, cordoning by the police and occasional clashes between these two parties. With strong political overtone the strike thus assumed an excellent militancy.

But cleavage in the leadership and consequent disunity in the ranks seriously jeopardized the progress of this heroic strike. The government also very conveniently launched severe attack upon the strikers. Subsequently on the verge of a collapse, the united strike committee called off the strike.

The government prosecuted eight leaders of the strike under the provisions of Trade Disputes Act on the allegation that they had organized the strike not in the interests of the workers but to cause sufferings to the public. But the prosecution failed and even the appeal preferred to the High Court was dismissed. Subsequently the Government of India introduced an amendment Bill in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1936 and 1938 seeking for inclusion of a provision in the Trade Disputes Act with arbitrary power to illegalize any strike. In 1937 even the Payment of Wages Act, 1936 was also amended as to entitle the employers to deduct wages of the workers for participating in 'stay in strikes'.

The resistance of the working class against retrenchment, wage-cut and other symptoms of the crisis thus met with severe repression. The colonial government tried to crush these struggles by issuing prohibitory orders on mass mobilization, resorting to arbitrary arrests and prosecution, by unleashing police atrocities, in other words, by totally negating all democratic rights. Even the moderate and reformist leaders of the labour movement could not help condemning these repressive tactics of the government. Directing sharp criticism against the government Mr. N. M. Joshi told,¹⁸ 'During these years, al-

though there were thousands of strikes in the country, the number of times the machinery of the Trade Disputes Act was used did not show the anxiety of the government for settlement of industrial disputes. Instead the Government of India and the local Governments depended on repressive powers which they possessed. As soon as a strike took place, Section 144 was used. Meetings were prohibited, people who either took part in the strikes or who were suspected of taking part in strikes were prosecuted, and the government used its authority and the whole machinery it possessed for breaking the strike instead of trying to settle the strike by means of the machinery of the Trade Disputes Act. Not only that, during all these years the penalizing clauses regarding the public utility services and the general strike had been hanging over the heads of the working classes like the sword of Damocles.' This was, in sum, the traumatic experience of Mr. Joshi, the doyen of the reformists who had so sincere faith in negotiation than in action.

Referring to the textile workers' strike in Bombay in 1934 Mr. Joshi further alleged,¹⁹ 'The government refused to use the machinery for the settlement of the strike. Instead, they used their powers under Section 144 and other powers under the emergency legislation, to break the strike. They succeeded, but they did not stop there as they considered the strike was illegal and went to the Court to try to penalize those people who had taken part in it.'

Another celebrated member of the reformist group who were scared away by the militancy of the workers' struggles, and formed Indian Trade Union Federation, that Mr. V. V. Giri also came out bitterly castigating the government's espionage against the trade union workers. It was an irony of fate that in his presidential address in the very inaugural session of that rival Federation Mr. Giri had to state, 'The moment a trade dispute is apprehended the Police and the Magistracy rush to the rescue of the employer, while the workers are left to their own wits in their fight against the oppression. The intelligence department of the police has a special fancy for labour leaders and also, as stated by the Whitley Commission, the whole information concerning a dispute is obtained more through the police than by direct contact with the workers' organizations.'

Another stalwart of the reformist clan, Mr. B. Shiva Rao

went further when he stated,²⁰ 'the police look upon the formation of a trade union as an undesirable thing. They approach the men when a union is formed and dissuade them from joining it or attending its meetings. When there is a strike the police exercise their influence upon shop-keepers to stop the supply of foodstuffs on credit, and the more zealous among them put undue pressure on the workers by threats to resume work. Sometimes the employers are in the habit of rewarding the police for services at the end of a strike. One is compelled to come to the conclusion that the activities of the police are not confined only to the preservation of order, but are inimical to the growth of Trade Unionism.'

These were the reformists' versions how the colonialists viewed the Indian trade union movement and dealt with it. No doubt it was cent per cent true.

It was also true that to ward off 'Communist menace', the government attacked the communists and the Left-wing, instituted Meerut Conspiracy Case and even banned the Communist Party of India but that was no consolation for the Right-wing. The Right-wing by their policy of compromise though succeeded in receiving certain amount of official patronage, they at the same time were treated hardly with any respect by the government and the employers as well, they rather, suffered humiliation from both the parties. It was not therefore the Left-wing only, the trade union movement, as a whole, was subjected to worst forms of onslaught by the imperialist government during this period.

Dissemination of Revolutionary Philosophy Among the Working Class :

The second split in the AITUC resulting in the formation of Red Trade Union Congress though largely impaired the unity of Indian trade union movement, yet the latter organization during the short span of its life, had to its credit a laudable performance of propagating revolutionary political philosophy among the mass of workers. Simultaneously with intensifying the workers' economic struggle, the Red Trade Union Congress came out with bold steps to politicalize the workers. Founding of Young Workers' League in the middle of 1930 with its attempt to inculcate a revolutionary outlook among the young worker

youths was another remarkable step in this direction.

Young Workers' League was born with the declared aims of establishing in India Workers' and Peasants' Republic, framing India's Constitution on socialistic principles and achieving workers' economic demands. The League declared to co-operate with militant trade unions and other working class parties to achieve these objectives. Young workers employed in the factories and the railways who were below 25 years of age were eligible for membership of this organization.

In 1934 at the initiative of this organization several meetings were held in Bengal against the repressive measures taken by the Bengal Government where people were asked to unitedly resist those repressions. On 18 March 1934 the League celebrated Paris Commune Day where Mr. S. V. Deshpande and other leaders explained the revolutionary significance of Paris Commune and called upon the workers to prepare for strike.

The Young Workers' League took a very prominent role in preparing the textile workers of Bombay for the general strike in 1934. The League distributed several leaflets among the workers and endeavoured to inspire them politically. After the withdrawal of textile workers' general strike in that year, on July 6 this organization issued a leaflet to the workers giving them a direct revolutionary call. Holding out the example of Russian Revolution, the leaflet stated,²¹ 'The workers and peasants in Russia were able to overthrow capitalism only because they settled the direction of their movement in consonance with the teachings of Marx and Lenin. It is necessary for the workers and peasants in India to chalk out their policy in agreement with the revolutionary Communist teachings of Marx and Lenin in order to free themselves permanently from the harassment of the money-lenders, Zamindars, capitalism and imperialism.' To inspire the workers who were in a broken spirit after the collapse of the general strike, the leaflet confidently stated, 'Though the general strike of the mill workers in Bombay has been broken for the time being still the struggle of the workers has not come to an end in consequence thereof The greed of capitalism of fattening itself by sucking the blood of workers will never cease It is essential for the workers to fight with this increasing *zulum* of this very imperialism. In order to achieve success in all these struggles it will be neces-

sary to give a more courageous stand than that given in the recent general strike.'

Remarkable also were the efforts made by the Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag) in politicalizing the workers. The union felicitated the leaders convicted in the Meerut Conspiracy Case in a reception arranged on their release from jail. Messrs. S. V. Ghate, S. S. Mirajkar, K. N. Joglekar, B. F. Bradley and other leaders attended the function presided over by Mr. B. T. Ranadive. On 21 January 1934 this union celebrated 'Lenin Day' by organizing mass meeting where the speakers explained to the workers the necessity of building up revolutionary mass movement on the basis of Leninism.

The executive committee of the Red Trade Union Congress in its meeting held at Jamshedpur on 21 and 22 January 1933 called upon the workers in the factories and the railways to observe strike on February 16 to protest against the conviction of the accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. By a leaflet issued in the name of Messrs. Somnath Lahiri, Bankim Mukherjee and S. G. Sardesai the workers were urged to observe 'Meerut Day' on February 16. In a meeting held at Bombay on that Day Mr. B. T. Ranadive and other leaders condemned the conviction of the accused. They said that by this conviction of the labour leaders the government had directly attacked the working-class movement. Mr. S. G. Sardesai presided over that meeting.²² In Calcutta meetings were held at Tollygunge and Metiaburz in observance of that Day.

'Unemployment Day' was observed on 12 February 1933 under the joint auspices of the All India Red Trade Union Congress and Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag). Meetings and demonstrations were held at Bombay on that day. Mr. B. T. Ranadive, Mr. S. G. Sardesai and other leaders addressed those meetings. The observance of this programme was especially remarkable in the background of formidable unemployment and retrenchment haunting the working class of the country in the days of world economic crisis.

'Anti-War Day' was observed on 1 August 1933 at the call of the Red Trade Union Congress. The Day was observed to protest against the imperialist intervention to destroy Soviet Union, the first workers' State of the world. Workers' meeting was held on that Day under the presidency of Mr. V. B. Khale.

In Bengal the Day was observed by holding workers' meetings at Metiaburz, Chandernagore and other places in the vicinity of Calcutta.²³ This programme was of great significance from the viewpoint of imbuing the working class with a sense of proletarian internationalism.

The anniversary of the Russian Revolution was observed on 7 November 1934 at the call of the Red Trade Union Congress. In the meetings held in different working-class centres the speakers explained to the workers the significance of October Socialist Revolution. In Calcutta a workers' rally was held at Monument Maidan which was joined by the workers belonging to Bengal Jute Workers' Union, Calcutta Tram Workers' Union, Dock Mazdoor and other unions.

While observing May-Day in the year 1934 the Red Trade Union Congress tried to inculcate among the workers an international outlook and sense of fraternity with the workers of the world.

The bitter class struggles that were being waged at the time by the working class of Austria, Germany and China were especially mentioned and the Indian workers' sympathy and solidarity with those struggles were boldly expressed. The May-Day meetings organized by the Red Trade Union Congress congratulated the Russian working class for its great stride forward in building socialism.

In 1933 the communists formed Ahmedabad Mill Mazdoor Union as an alternative to the class collaborationist policy of Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association. But on 5 November 1934 that organization was declared illegal and six of its leaders were arrested.

The above discussion is by no means exhaustive, it is a cursory one purported to show the attempts taken in this period to permeate the working class with a higher political consciousness and to rouse in them a lofty revolutionary ideal. These endeavours went hand in hand with day to day economic struggles of the workers and these were pioneered by the Red Trade Union Congress.

This was a period when the communists made serious efforts to propagate the revolutionary ideas of Marxism and Leninism from inside the jail and from outside as well. In this very period a large number of political workers connected with terrorist move-

ment shunned the wrong path of individual terrorism and accepted Marxian philosophy as their revolutionary creed. Marxian philosophy thus received a wider acceptance during this period.

The working-class movement of the period suffered from serious deficiencies both in regard to its intensity and extensiveness and it lost much of its striking power, but in respect of developing the class and revolutionary consciousness of the working class the contribution of this period was quite significant.

*Declining Organization—
Efforts for Unity 1931-34 :*

Organizationally the trade union movement of this period came at a low ebb. In one year between 1929-30 and 1930-31 the number of registered trade unions though marked an increase from 104 to 119, the total membership of the unions declined from 242,355 to 219,115. Bengal ranked first in respect of increase in the number of registered trade unions, the number having shot up from 19 to 24 within one year between 1930 and 1931. The total number of registered trade unions in the country in 1931-32 increased to 131 with a total membership of 235,693. This year the number of registered trade unions marked maximum increase in Madras where the number stood at 23 in place of 17 of the previous year. In 1932-33 the all-India total of the number of registered trade unions stood at 170 with a membership 237,369. This year Bombay Presidency topped the list in respect of increase, the number rising to 44 from the previous year's number of 32. In 1933-34 the all-India aggregate rose to 191 but the membership declined to 208,071, recording the maximum fall since 1928-29. But noticeably, in spite of this fall in membership of the trade unions, the number of trade disputes in 1934 recorded a considerable rise in comparison to that of the previous year. While the number of disputes during 1932-33 remained at 118, it rose to 146 during 1933-34.

The crushing burden of an unforeseen crisis though impelled the working class to get organized, the prevailing disunity in organizational sphere, the existence of three parallel national centres in particular stultified this aspiration of the workers. The declining membership of the trade unions reflects the consequences of the disunity.

While seceding from AITUC in 1929 the seceders under the leadership of Messrs. Joshi, Chaman Lall and their associates claimed representation of majority of the workers. They claimed to represent 30 unions with a membership of 136,639. But when they formed Indian Trade Union Federation on 20 July 1930, they found with them actually 7 unions with a membership of 14,300 only. The first session of that Federation held at Madras in 1932 was, however, attended by representatives from 32 unions having a membership of 82,500.

During the first split in 1929, all railway unions affiliated to the All India Railwaymen's Federation barring only G.I.P. Railway workers' union seceded from AITUC. The Seamen's union also followed suit. The unions of the Postal employees and Majoor Mahajan of Ahmedabad were already outside AITUC and now the railway unions too joining their rank, a vast number of workers and employees of the country remained outside the organizational fold of the central trade unions.

This disunity seriously impaired the big working-class struggles of this period. In spite of mass retrenchment in the railways, it was not possible to organize any general strike of the railway workers to resist the offensive. The executive committee of the AITUC which met at Calcutta in November 1930 resolved to organize general strike on the railways on the demand of reinstatement of the dismissed union workers of G.I.P. and E.I. Railways and to resist the danger of retrenchment which loomed large in all the railways. But Mr. Jamnadas Mehta, president of the B.B. & C.I. Railway Employees' union in a letter addressed to Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, president of AITUC pointed out the illegality of the proposed action in accordance with the provisions of Trade Disputes Act and alleging moreover that the decision of the strike had been taken in a very unjust manner informed him of the inability of his union to join the strike.²⁴

This incident was a miserable instance of disunity in labour movement during the period. This disunity in combination with the anti-struggle attitude of the reformist leaders completely ruined the prospect of a general strike on the railways. This resulted in a free-style retrenchment of the railway workers and a setback of the strike conducted by the G.I.P. Railway Union in 1930.

Similarly the strikes of the jute workers in Bengal and the textile workers of Bombay, Nagpur and Sholapur, though were conducted with exemplary heroism, entailed immense sacrifice of the workers. Yet disunity at the top which had its pernicious effect at the bottom stood as a serious obstacle in the way of successful culmination of the strikes and achieving the desired result.

But the invaluable experience which the working class gathered through these bitter struggles laid bare to them the indispensability of united action for achieving success. The lesson which the working class thus drew found reflection in the subsequent years' efforts for unity and ultimate success in that direction.

Meanwhile the Whitley Commission's Report which came out in 1931 totally disappointed the workers. The Report contained neither any recommendation for solving the problems of retrenchment and unemployment which by then assumed formidable dimensions, nor any other provision for mitigating the basic problems of colonial and capitalist exploitation of the workers. The Commission accomplished their holy tasks by recommending some minor palliatives only. Yet the moderate and reformist leaders of Indian trade union movement discovered in that Report the prospect of ameliorating the plight of the working class.

Referring to the imperialist game that revealed itself in this Report, *Liberty*, a news daily published from Calcutta very rightly observed²⁵ 'The report of the Whitley Commission is an elaborate and well planned attempt to wean away the Trade Union movement from the nationalist struggle typified in the National Congress of India. . . . Their reports will considerably strengthen the hands of the moderate leaders of the trade union movement. An excellent case has been made out for 'healthy development of trade union movement under reformist leadership' The leadership that will seek guidance and inspiration from the Whitley Report will lead labour to *cul-de-sac*. Labour at this hour stands in need of bold and foresighted leadership.'

In the context of the situation then obtaining, the working class of India stood in need of a leadership not only 'bold and foresighted', but a leadership capable of leading the working class in an uncompromising struggle against imperialism and

exploitation of both native and foreign capitalism. The working class therefore exerted pressure on all sections of the leadership for forging unity which was to them in the prevailing condition a question of supreme importance.

In 1931 the leaders of the Indian Trade Union Federation Messrs. R. R. Bakhale, N. M. Joshi and Chaman Lall made an attempt to establish some sort of co-operation between various sections of Indian labour movement. Meanwhile, Mr. Mukundalal Sarkar, general secretary of AITUC also issued an appeal urging the return of those who had seceded from AITUC. But this attempt for unity was confined mainly between the parent organization and the Indian Trade Union Federation. The most militant group having left AITUC during its Calcutta session, ideologically there seemed to be no insurmountable bar in the way of unification of the remaining two groups.

In the meantime, on behalf of All India Railwaymen's Federation also some steps were taken towards unity. The organized unions of the workers in different railways were affiliated to this Federation and so in spite of general disunity this Federation was placed in some sort of a prestigious position in Indian labour movement. Taking advantage of this position the All India Railwaymen's Federation convened a trade union conference at Bombay on 10 May 1931 and that conference formed a Trade Union Unity Committee' with Mr. Jamnadas Mehta as president and Mr. V. V. Giri, Mr. B. Shiva Rao as members among others. This Committee was formed for considering the question of organizational unity in trade union movement and to submit a report accordingly. The Committee's report was published in May 1932 and what the Committee told in its report was very much significant. The Report *inter-alia* stated, 'The gulf which divided the communists from the other two sections of this movement was not bridgeable, and therefore the Committee recommended a programme of unity among the remaining sections.' The Committee thus very frankly spelled out that unity should be forged in between the various sections of the reformists and nationalists with the total exclusion of the communists. In a special conference held in the same year at Madras the report of this Committee was accepted.

The twelfth session of the AITUC was held at Madras on 10-12 September 1932 under the presidency of Mr. J. N.

Mitra. This session rejected the Report of the Trade Union Unity Committee and instead certain proposals based on the Platform of Unity prepared by the Girni Kamgar Union (Batatawala Building) were accepted and the same were submitted to the Trade Union Unity Committee. The session recommended to the Unity Committee deletion of the provisions for affiliation to International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam, as contained in the Report of that Committee.

Meanwhile certain other organizational developments also took place. Sensing that the Report of the Unity Committee would not be acceptable to the AITUC, the leaders of the Indian Trade Union Federation and a section of the leadership of the railway unions, who already formed a National Federation of Labour among themselves and appointed a provisional committee for the purpose with Mr. Jamnadas Mehta, Mr. V. V. Giri and Mr. Guruswami as members among others, met at a second 'Unity Conference' at Madras in July 1932 where it was resolved that the railway unions under their control and the Indian Trade Union Federation should come together to form a new central organization. Accordingly in a special conference held at Calcutta on 19-20 April 1933 Indian Trade Union Federation and the newly born National Federation of Labour were amalgamated to give birth to an altogether new organization under the title of National Trade Union Federation.

The first session of this National Trade Union Federation was held at Bombay on 24-26 December 1933 under the chairmanship of Mr. Mrinal Kanti Bose. Delegates from 47 unions representing 135,000 members attended the session. But the right-wing leadership had bickerings among themselves. In the first session itself delegates of six unions representing 15,000 members walked out of the conference as a sequel to a clash of opinion with Mr. N. M. Joshi and met separately. They further resolved to form another new organization under the title All India Federation of Labour. This new organization was formed under the presidency of Muhammad Daud, a leader of Bengal Mariners' Union and an ex-president of AITUC.

Anyway, in this very first session, the National Trade Union Federation decided to affiliate itself with the International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam.

It may be mentioned here that the followers of Mr. M. N.

Roy also joined hands with the right-reformists and very zealously acted in breeding disunity in the Indian trade union movement. Mr. M. N. Roy was the founder of the *émigré* Communist Party of India at Tashkent in 1920. But subsequently he indulged in anti-party activities and on 4 December 1929 the Communist International announced his expulsion from the Party.²⁶

After his expulsion attempts were made to form a group in India under his leadership with Messrs. Tayib Sheikh, Sundar Kabadi and others. Secretly returning to India at the end of the year 1930, Mr. M. N. Roy, consolidated his group. But as an accused in the Kanpur Conspiracy Case of 1924 he was arrested by the Government of India in 1931. This group tried to infiltrate into the labour movement of India. Messrs. J. N. Mitra, Moniben Kara, V. B. Karnik, Rajani Mukherjee etc. who were associated with the labour movement of India belonged to this group. This Royist group aided by the other right-wing reformists tried to weed out the communists from the Indian labour movement and they were largely responsible for precipitating split in the AITUC. After the formation of Indian Trade Union Federation by Messrs. V. V. Giri, Chaman Lall and other right-wingers and founding of Red Trade Union Congress by the communists, this group came to the leadership of AITUC as aide-de-camp of Messrs. R. S. Ruikar, Mukundalal Sarkar, Hariharnath Shastri and such other likeminded leaders.

The communists in the meanwhile became very active for forging unity in trade union movement. Basing on the political thesis of building up anti-imperialist united national front, the communists came forward to unify the trade union movement without, however, making any room for compromise on the fundamental tenet of class-struggle. The release of the accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, by this time, was also of tremendous help to the communists in this regard.

In the midst of these developments the thirteenth session of the truncated AITUC was held at Kanpur on 3 December 1933 under the presidentship of Mr. G. L. Kandalkar. This was in fact a stale and routine session without any enthusiasm whatsoever.

Subsequently the executive committee of AITUC met at Nagpur in January 1935. The leadership of AITUC felt the

pressure of the rank and file urging for unity, but at the same time it also appeared to them that without solving the problems that stood in the way of unity, unification of the central trade unions was more illusory than real. While on the one hand, the communists and other leftists who formed the Red Trade Union Congress remained firm adherents of the doctrine of class-struggle, the right-wing reformists on the other mortally feared the doctrine of class-struggle and instead were in favour of solving labour disputes through tri-partite discussions. Moreover, the leaders of the Indian Trade Union Federation were keenly desirous of representing at the ILO conference which was one of the principal causes for the first split in AITUC. But others were opposed to any representation in the ILO which they considered as an imperialist dominated body and of no avail to the Indian labour. But the right-reformists were not ready for any compromise on this point. In fact, in the first session of the National Trade Union Federation held in December 1933 Mr. Jamnadas Mehta made an indication to the AITUC that they might go to the extent of postponing the issue of affiliation with Amsterdam International but on the question of participating in the ILO sessions there was no room for compromise.

Caught in the cross-current of these divergent opinions, the executive committee of the AITUC in its session at Nagpur formulated certain principles for bringing about unity among the central trade unions. These principles were: (1) Unequivocal acceptance of the principle of class-struggle, (2) No affiliation to any international organization, (3) The question of India's labour representation to the ILO to be decided annually and to be binding on the unions, (4) Acceptance of the principle of one union in one industry and (5) Acceptance of AITUC as the central trade union organization of the Indian working class.

After formulation of these principles for achieving unity, the fourteenth session of the AITUC was held at Calcutta on 19-21 April 1935 under the presidency of Mr. Hariharnath Shastry. Before the session the Reception Committee invited all groups of unions of the country for participating in the session. The communists and their leftist fellow-travellers had already been yearning for unity and so when the call came they promptly responded. The representatives from the Red

Trade Union Congress attended the AITUC session and in accordance with an unanimous decision reached by both the parties for unity in trade union movement, the Red Trade Union Congress was dissolved and merged back in AITUC.

Before this session, in March 1935 two representatives of AITUC Mr. Hariharnath Shastry and Mr. Ruikar had met Messrs. N. M. Joshi, V. V. Giri, B. Shiva Rao, the leaders of National Trade Union Federation and had held discussion on the question of unity. At the end of the discussion, on 12 March 1935 both the parties unanimously drew up a joint statement. The statement while deploring the split in the trade union movement stated that even if complete unity was not possible some machinery should be brought into existence, so that joint action by several organizations might be practicable. Towards this it was proposed to constitute a joint committee composed of 10 representatives from each organization which would be entrusted with the task of drafting proposals for common action and those proposals on being ratified by the participating organizations could be put into operation by all units concerned.

The statement was later endorsed by both the general councils of the AITUC and the NTUF.

Efforts for unity made this much of progress till the fourteenth session of AITUC. After merger of the Red Trade Union Congress with AITUC, a resolution was passed in the fourteenth session directing the AITUC's representatives on the Joint Committee to further intensify the efforts for unity.

Consequent upon these efforts for unity a Joint Labour Board was formed in 1936 to facilitate participation of the unions affiliated to both AITUC and NTUF in common programmes of action. This was a very significant step towards forging wider unity in the divided trade union movement of India.

Sharpening of Trade Union Struggles 1935-36 :

The period 1935-36 witnessed reinvigoration of the trade union movement that got substantially weakened during the last few years. The efforts for restoration of unity in trade union movement was undoubtedly fruitful and conducive to this renewed strength, but at the same time certain developments in the political front also provided favourable circumstances for this growth. Playing ducks and drakes with civil disobe-

dience movement and other popular upsurges and finally the unconcealed retreat on the part of National Congress found countervailing forces in the accentuated communist activities and formation of Congress Socialist Group. The upswing of left oriented politics, caused by the release of these new political forces in the post-1934 years, exerted a regenerating influence on the waning working class movement of India.

Signs of a change in the condition of world depression were already noticed at the beginning of the year 1934. In India the change was first reflected in the jute and cotton textile industries. The depression being on the way out, the working force in the organized industries of India too started marking a steady increase. While the total labour force numbered 1,403,212 in 1933, it rose to 1,487,231 in 1934, 1,610,932 in 1935 and 1,652,147 in 1936.

In spite of a noticeable improvement in industrial production, the owners refused to restore the cut in the wages that was effected in the name of depression. Rather, these signs of industrial prosperity incensed the owners with a thirst for super-profit and they took recourse to various labour intensifying devices subjecting the working class to increased exploitation. So during this period the working class had to engage itself in hard struggles for both restoration of the cut and increase in the wages as well as against the newly intensified exploitation.

Among the strikes that occurred in this period, those in the Keshoram Cotton Mill of Calcutta and in the Ahmedabad Cotton Mills claimed the lion's share of the total working days lost. 5,000 workers of Keshoram Cotton Mill struck work which resulted in a loss of 119,000 working days. 23,000 textile workers of Ahmedabad struck work against 12½ per cent cut in wages causing a loss of 93,000 working days. In 1935-36, 63 per cent of the strikes occurred on the question of wages.

The textile workers of Ahmedabad struck work virtually ignoring the agreement that was entered into by the leaders of Majoor Mahajan admitting wage-cut and which Gandhiji advised the workers to 'cherfully accept.' In spite of Majoor Mahajan, a Strike Committee was formed at the initiative of the communists at the call of which the workers began the strike from 21 January 1935. But Majoor Mahajan having started active opposition to the strike, it was called off on February 5.

The textile workers of Kanpur also struck work. A strike commenced in Artherton West Mill on 10 September 1936 against wage-cut and retrenchment which ended in a settlement after lasting for eight days. Another strike occurred in Copper Alloy Mill. On the 39th day of that strike, a hartal was observed at Kanpur in its support and after lasting for 41 days it was settled on December 29.

Strikes occurred during this period in the jute mills of Bengal. On 9 April 1936 the workers of Hukumchand Jute Mill went on strike. The owners began intimidation of the strikers and when ultimately police was called in, clashes occurred between the two parties. Police repression made the workers intensely indignant and the strike spread out to other mills. 20,000 workers of the jute mills at Jagaddal, Naihati and Hooghly joined this strike. The workers waged these strike-struggles on the demands of restoration of the cut in wages and raising weekly working hours from 40 to 54.

In the Beawar Cotton Mills at Ajmer-Merwara 4,000 workers struck work against wage-reduction in July 1936 causing a loss of 375,000 working days. Speciality of this strike was in that it took place in a native State. Designing to avoid enforcement of the provisions of Factory Act and thus to exploit the workers to the maximum extent, the capitalists during this period started industrial investments in the native States. But the backward workers of these native States too embarked on strike-struggles to improve their living and working conditions.

Biggest strike of the time occurred on the B.N. Railways which was joined by 26,500 workers. The strike commenced on 13 December 1936 and lasted till 10 February 1937 resulting in a loss of more than one million working days.

Before commencement of the strike the B.N. Railway Indian Labour Union held a prolonged negotiation with the management. But suddenly 27 train examiners were dismissed from service and against that dismissal the workers started stay-in-strike. The railway authorities far from reinstating the dismissed workers, issued orders dismissing a further number of 1100 workers. Simultaneously, the Railway Board withdrew the recognition of the Union. Against these arbitrary actions of the authorities, the strike started and spread out on the entire railway.

During pendency of the strike, the National Congress which was in session at Faizpur passed resolution extending sympathy with the strikers and calling upon the people to stand in support of the strike.

The events discussed above relate only to some major actions, besides which there occurred many minor or shortlived strikes in different industries.

Organizational Development :

Despite attempts to illegalize strikes through ordinances and enactments, as many as 144,217 workers participated in 145 strikes in the year 1935 resulting in a loss of more than one million working days. In 1936 the number of strikes was 157 which involved 168,029 workers and caused a loss of 5,358,062 working days.

During this time the number of unions registered under Trade Union Act also marked an increase. In 1935 the total number of registered unions in India stood at 213 with a membership of 284,918. Since implementation of the provisions of the Trade Union Act in 1927, this was the highest number of membership enrolled by the registered trade unions. In 1936, the number of registered unions marked a further increase and rose to 241. Moreover, while the number of women members of the registered unions in 1927-28 stood only at 1,166, in 1935-36 that number rose to 7,309.

During this period the trade union movement spread almost to all the industrial centres in different provinces. The rise in the number of trade unions was, however, maximum in the industrially developed provinces of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. So long, Bombay Presidency was foremost in this respect, but since this period the situation began changing in favour of Bengal where the rise in the number of trade unions and their membership surpassed the records of other provinces.

In 1933-34, the number of trade unions in Bombay, Bengal and Madras stood at 45, 54 and 38 respectively whereas after a steady rise the corresponding numbers in 1937-38 stood at 72, 172 and 54.

The figures indicate a rise in the number of trade unions in all the three provinces during the span of these four years, but in Bengal the rise was more than three times.

Judging industrywise in regard to the number of trade unions and membership, the maximum rise was visible in the railways during 1935-36. 50 unions in that industry had a total membership of 149,798 during that year. Membership among the textile workers and seamen also marked an increase, the corresponding numbers being 26,709 and 26,511.

The government, during this period, concentrated attack on the fighting trade unions. The registration of Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag) was cancelled on 9 January 1935 and some other trade unions under communist influence were declared illegal.

In its second session held at Nagpur in 1935 the National Trade Union Federation claimed affiliation of 60 unions with a membership of 147,516. Out of this, 106,629 members belonged to the unions in the Railways, Docks and Shipping. After merger of the Red Trade Union Congress, the fifteenth session of the AITUC was held at Bombay on 17-18 May 1936 under the presidency of Miss Moniben Kara. During that session 71 unions with a membership of 93,750 were affiliated to the AITUC.

That session elected Mr. Sibnath Banerjee as president and Miss Moniben Kara as general secretary for the next term.

The sharpening and extension of the trade union movement during 1935-36 prepared the ground for the Indian working class to play a more remarkable role in the economic and political mass struggles of the subsequent years. Moreover, the experiences gathered by the working class during the intensive struggles of this year acted invaluable in enabling them to restore unity in the following period.

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SHARP STRUGGLES DURING PROVINCIAL AUTONOMY AND ON THE EVE OF WAR 1937-39

Political Background :

The working-class movement of India which started extensively growing after the World War I made rapid advance during the subsequent two decades and assumed a very significant rôle in the national-political movement of India on the eve of another imminent War. Internationally it was a period of gathering strength by the fascist forces, both Italy and Germany having gone under their political sway. Germany had trampled under foot the Treaty of Versailles, occupied Reihnland, Italy and had invaded Abyssinia and fascist Franco in Spain had been waging war against the democratic forces. The danger of another devastating world war was looming large.

That was a crucial juncture in the world history. And just at this moment, the precious experience that the working class gathered, the blooming class-consciousness that it got endowed with and the political maturity that it attained were of the highest order and had no parallel in the past.

In the world arena at this stage, the Communist International called for building anti-fascist Popular Front in the capitalist countries and anti-imperialist United National Front in the colonies to fight against imperialism and its most reactionary variety, fascism. The advanced sections of the European working class were thus struggling to give shape to these Popular Fronts while in India the working class was confronted with the revolutionary task of building anti-imperialist United National Front.

When India was thus faced with the historic responsibility of waging an uncompromising struggle against imperialism, in the year 1937 provincial elections were held in accordance with

the constitutional provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935.

Enactment of the Government of India Bill was opposed by all strata of the Indian people, but that opposition did not assume that dimension which could force a retreat upon the government.

At the Faizpur session held in 1936, National Congress unequivocally rejected the Government of India Act 1935 and the new Constitution framed in accordance thereof. Declaring the Constitution as a betrayal to India's freedom movement, Congress called upon to fight against it inside and outside the Legislative Assembly. Despite this declaration Congress had to take part in the elections. Explaining the purpose of participating in the elections, in his presidential speech at Faizpur Congress Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru stated,¹ 'We go to the Legislatures not to co-operate with the apparatus of British imperialism, but to combat the Act and seek to end it, and to resist in every way British imperialism in its attempt to strengthen its hold on India and its exploitation of the Indian people . . . we are not going to the Legislatures to pursue the path of Constitutionalism or barren reformism.' Continuing he said 'it seems to me that the only logical consequence of the Congress policy . . . is to have nothing to do with office and ministry. It would inevitably mean a kind of partnership with British imperialism . . . in the hateful task of repression of our advanced elements . . . we must think in terms of deadlocks and not in terms of carrying on with the office.'

The election manifesto issued by the Congress promised improvement of the living conditions of the labour and the peasantry.

The elections were to be held in the provinces only as the provincial part alone of the new Constitution was going to be implemented. During selection of candidates for these elections, the Parliamentary Committee formed for this purpose under the presidency of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was inclined to compromise with the reactionary groups and individuals with a bid to seek majority by any means. At the Faizpur Congress Mr. Nehru warned against this tendency and asked to stop that dangerous drift. According to Mr. Nehru,² 'the solution for the problems of India ought to be approached in the setting

of the world situation, as a part of the world struggle between the forces of capitalist-imperialism on the one side and of socialism which promised the end of poverty, subjection and exploitation on the other.' And so he opposed combination with the reactionaries for a victory in the ensuing elections.

The majority of the workers were deprived of the voting right in these elections. Although the Reforms Act of 1919 first provided the question of enfranchisement of the workers, it was only during enactment of the Government of India Bill 1935 that this question assumed real importance. The Royal Commission on Labour in India opined in favour of participation in elections by the registered unions as the best means of representation of labour, but the Indian Franchise Committee did not recognize labour representation on trade union basis and instead the said Committee provided for special labour constituencies.

The trade unions of the country were unconnected with and had no say on this provision of special labour constituencies. In fact this was a highly anti-labour aspect of the new Constitution. Further, the income qualification prescribed for the purpose deprived most of the workers from the right to vote.

Under the new Constitution only 13 per cent of the people were eligible to vote, yet Congress triumphed in the general elections. Support of the radical forces was one of the reasons for this success. Barring a few centres at Bombay and Nagpur, All India Trade Union Congress also lent its support to the Congress candidates in the elections.

But after this victory, on the question of acceptance of office Congress stood sharply divided into two divergent opinions. There was a great deal of argument as to whether Congress should accept ministries in the provinces. According to Gandhiji acceptance of office was 'a serious attempt on the one hand to avoid bloody revolution and on the other hand to avoid mass civil disobedience on a scale hitherto unattempted.' But Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru already urged with great vehemence the outright rejection of office. In his presidential speech at Lucknow Congress he unequivocally stated,³ 'To accept office and ministry under the conditions of the Act, is to negative our rejection of it and to stand self-condemned. National honour and self-respect cannot accept the position, for it would inevi-

tably mean our co-operation in some measure with the repressive apparatus of imperialism, and we would become partners in the repression and in the exploitation of our people.' Concluding he said, 'I am convinced that for the Congress to favour the acceptance of office, or even to hesitate and waver about it, would be vital error. It will be a pit from which it would be difficult for us to come out.'

Mr. Nehru was in a minority both in the Congress Working Committee and the All India Congress Committee. After the elections the All India Congress Committee met at Delhi in March 1937 and resolved to accept office in provinces where the Congress commanded a majority in the legislature.

On 7 July 1937 the Congress ministers assumed office. The provincial autonomy was undeniably circumscribed by very limited powers, but the policy towards the labour which the Congress ministries pursued during their 2½ years' rule was actually symptomatic of what to follow during future Congress rule in an independent India. Assumption of office whether by Congress or by non-Congress parties was not just becoming 'partners in the repression and in the exploitation of our people' as Mr. Nehru was afraid of, but the ministries turned out to be the direct instruments of repression and exploitation of the Indian working class in double confirmation of Mr. Nehru's prophesy.

Working-Class Struggles :

Formation of ministries in different provinces was followed by a spate of trade union activities and waves of big strikes of the workers. Temporary stabilization of world capitalism in consequence of a mad armament race between different capitalist countries generated a new wave of working-class struggles in the capitalist world and the strike struggles of the Indian working class that took place during 1937-38 were a link in the chain of those world events.

The number of registered trade unions as well as the number of strikers and man days lost during the period from 1937 to 1939 marked a considerable increase. The rise in the number of unions and their membership during these three years is indicated in the following table.

Year	No. of Registered Trade Unions		Membership as shown in the returns of the unions
1936-37	...	271	261,047
1937-38	...	420	390,112
1938-39	...	562	399,159

Besides these registered unions, there were many other unions which were unregistered. The above figures therefore do not reflect a complete picture in regard to the number of unions and their membership. In fact, many more workers were organized into unions, both registered and unregistered.

The increase in the number of trade unions was accompanied with a corresponding rise in the number of labour disputes. More and more workers were joining the strike struggles. The following table indicates the number of disputes, the number of participant workers and the number of working days lost during the period 1937 to 1939.

Year	No. of disputes		Workers involved	Working days lost
1937	...	379	647,800	8,982,257
1938	...	399	401,075	9,098,708
1939	...	406	409,075	4,992,795

These figures indicate the rising trend of strikes since the assumption of ministries in 1937 although the number of working days lost in the year 1939 registered a substantial fall.

But the extent and intensity of the struggles of that period cannot be fully gauged by these statistics only. The movement encompassed all the big and small industrial centres of the country and many workers who had not tasted as yet what a struggle was, this time tightened up their belts and plunged direct into the struggles. Workers' rallies and demonstrations rocked the industrial centres without exception although these struggles did not always give birth to any permanent trade union. Many a time, transient struggles broke out without however any sign of permanence. But even these temporary flare-ups were not ineffectual, rather all these struggles and organizational activities laid a firmer basis of Indian trade union movement.

Keeping pace with the new wave of struggles in the western capitalist countries, the working class of India too embarked upon strike struggles for restoration of the cut and also increase in wages, against retrenchment and against all other offensives that were launched upon the working class during the period of world depression. The assumption of popular ministries in the provinces too generated some sort of optimism among the workers in certain cases as they began to naively believe that their struggles against capitalist exploitation in this new situation would not invite any repression from the government.

These episodes of heroic struggles of the workers in different parts of the country and the immense sufferings that these struggles entailed are extremely moving no doubt, but the limited space available does not, however, permit narration of these events except only a few ones of major importance.

On the top of these struggles was the historic general strike of the jute workers of Bengal in 1937. This strike drew in 225,000 workers and lasted for 74 days beginning from February 26 to May 10. Inclusive of this general strike, this year a total of 166 strikes occurred in Bengal claiming a loss of 6,090,883 working days. This in other words meant that 61.74 per cent of the all-India total of the strikes of the year 1937 occurred in Bengal alone involving as many as 365,699 workers.

The general strike of the jute workers was organized on the demands of restoration of wage-cut, ending with the policy of retrenchment and reinstatement of those reduced, stopping repression and several other demands. This was a highly united action conducted by a Central Strike Committee representing all shades of opinion.

The slump being over, along with other industries, the jute industry also started flourishing again from the year 1936 and more and more profits began flowing into the coffers of the owners. The workers therefore very justifiably took recourse to this struggle for realization of the demands consistently ignored by the owners in spite of the industry's prosperity. But the then Fazlul Haque Ministry of Bengal spared no pains to crush this justified struggle of the workers by unleashing repression on the plea that the strike had no economic basis and it was 'being used by the communist leaders to pave the way to a revolution in India.' Section 144 was promulgated prohibiting

entry of the labour leaders in the jute mill areas and simultaneously arresting a number of workers. The Police was deployed to break the strike and the workers were fired upon injuring some of them. Even physical torture was inflicted upon the leaders of the strike.

But this strike elicited popular support in Bengal. A mass meeting organized by the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee in Calcutta on February 21 condemned the repressive policy of the government.⁴ The students of Bengal too came forward. They constituted a Relief Fund in support of the strike and appealed to the people for generous contributions.⁵ Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose also made an appeal for contribution to that fund.⁶

The Congress Working Committee which was in session at Allahabad adopted a resolution supporting the strike and at the same time condemning deployment of army and the police to put down the struggles.⁷ Poet Rabindra Nath Tagore too did not remain aloof. He expressed his unstinted support for the struggling jute workers and urged the countrymen for coming forward in aid of the workers and their dependents.⁸

Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru also extended his support to the strike. In Madras too a committee was formed under the chairmanship of the Mayor of the City to mobilize support for the strike.⁹

The strike thus assumed a national importance and in the face of this pressure the Indian Jute Mills Association had to retreat a little. The leaders of the strike committee held negotiations with Mr. Fazlul Haque and on certain assurances on the demands, the strike was finally called off on May 10.

The communists played a significant role in organizing this strike. The non-communist labour leaders too were sincerely active. Messrs. Bankim Mukherjee, Muzaffar Ahmad, Niharendu Dutta Majumdar, Sibnath Banerjee and other notable labour organizers were in the leadership of the strike.

One curious thing is to be noted here. While the non-Congress Fazlul Haque ministry which was in office in Bengal took recourse to repressive measures to crush the strike, National Congress openly came forward in support of the strike and condemned the repression. But in Bombay, a Congress ministry was in office and during the same period what the said Congress ministry did in crushing the struggles of the Bombay workers

far surpassed the record set in Bengal by the Haque ministry.

In regard to the intensity of labour struggles in the year 1937 Bombay Presidency came next to Bengal. In that year 88 strikes occurred in Bombay drawing in 109,858 workers which caused a loss of 877,211 working days.

Madras stood third where 61 strikes occurred in that year involving a total of 60,980 workers, the number of working days lost being 656,404.

In the United Provinces, 15 strikes took place in that year which drew in 63,350 workers and caused a loss of 704,940 working days. The high water-mark of the strike waves was Kanpur textile workers' strike which developed into a general strike in the industry in July 1937. Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha began an agitation demanding restoration of the cut and increase in wages, stopping retrenchment and dismissal and implementation of other items of a ten-point charter of demands. This agitation ultimately grew into a general strike drawing in 40,000 workers.

Here too, the Congress ministry headed by Mr. Govind Vallabh Pant issued prohibitory orders on holding of rallies and demonstrations and took punitive measures against some of the labour leaders invoking the provisions of Criminal Procedure Code—and all these were done to disrupt the strike. But this repression failed to demoralize the workers. Ultimately pressure of this movement brought the Chief Minister and the owners to a negotiation with the labour leaders and in consequence thereof the strike was called off on August 9. As an outcome of this negotiation a Labour Inquiry Committee was formed under the chairmanship of Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

In the same year 14 strikes occurred in Bihar and 5 in the Central Provinces. These strikes of the two provinces caused a loss of 222,000 working days. 14 strikes occurred in the Punjab involving 8,545 workers and causing a loss of 21,000 working days. In Southern India, Coimbatore, Bangalore, Pondichery and Madurai became strong centres of labour agitation during this period.

In the year 1938 despite an increase in the number of strikes, the number of participants came down. But this fall was balanced by the rise in the number of working days lost in the same year.

In this year the jute workers of Bengal were again forced to be on strike. The Fazlul Haque ministry went back on their assurances, moreover, promulgated an Ordinance reducing the working hours of the workers to 45 hours a week. 90,000 workers came out on strike protesting against this Ordinance and retrenchment of several workers. Besides this strike, in Bengal 14,000 workers of Indian Iron and Steel Works at Kulti and Hirapur also struck work.

In the same year the textile workers of Kanpur had to participate in a second general strike. The Labour Inquiry Committee that was appointed in the previous year considered the financial condition of the textile mills to be satisfactory and recommended for the industry a minimum monthly wage of Rs. 15 with a regular system of yearly increment. The owners opposed this recommendation and at the same time they withdrew the recognition of Mazdoor Sabha. This led 46,000 workers of the textile mills to a second general strike since the month of May. Mr. Hariharnath Shastri and several other labour leaders pleaded for postponement of the strike, but the vigorous campaign conducted by the communists in favour of the strike rendered it irresistible. The strike having begun, the Congress ministry, as usual, promulgated Section 144 in the mill areas prohibiting all mass mobilizations of the workers. The ministry reprimanded both the owners and the labourers, although at the same time they advised the former to accept the recommendations of the Inquiry Committee. The strike having been heroically fought for long 52 days without any sign of flagging, the owners ultimately assured to accept the recommendations and the strike was then called off on July 4.

One characteristic that marked this strike of the Kanpur textile workers was the active support it received from the workers of Match factory, Iron foundry, Burma Shell and other industrial units of the city. Moreover, foiling all sorts of fomentation for communal riots, workers of both the communities—Hindus and Muslims—unitedly joined this strike.

In 1938, 90,000 workers of Bombay participated in a strike protesting against the most anti-labour Industrial Disputes Bill introduced by the Congress ministry. Details of the Bill have, however, been discussed separately.

On the railways the workers conducted agitation against

retrenchment and speed-up. The reformist leadership of the All India Railwaymen's Federation hardly took any initiative for combating retrenchment.

On an industrywise analysis it appears that in 1938 strikes in the textile and woollen industries claimed the largest number of working days lost. Whereas in 1937 these two industries caused a loss of 2,574,037 working days, the same for the year 1938 stood at 4,442,577.

In the engineering industry 8 strikes occurred in 1937 which drew in 2,311 workers and caused a loss of 15,521 working days whereas in 1938, 42 strikes occurred in the same industry involving 27,228 workers and claiming a loss of 853,992 working days. In the mining industry 6 strikes occurred in 1937 with 5,938 participants and a loss of 7,938 working days, whereas in 1938 in the same industry 7 strikes occurred with 10,502 participants and a loss of 496,495 working days.

On a further analysis of the strikes during 1937-38, it appears that: *Firstly* the strikes instead of remaining confined within the organized industrial centres like Bombay, Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Sholapur, Madras and Kanpur engulfed all the industrial centres of the country.

Secondly, these strikes spread out to small and miscellaneous and even seasonal industries which so long remained outside the orbit of trade union action. Workers in the coir industry of Trivancore-Cochin, in the pottery industry of Jabbalpur, in the saw-mills of Berilley and in other small and unorganized industries like bidi, match, printing press, motor transport and even the toilers like rickshaw-pullers, coachmen of horse or bullock-driven carts and similar other toiling people participated in these strikes on their respective demands. Out of the total number of 397 strikes that occurred in 1937, the workers of these miscellaneous industries claimed a share of 143 which involved 74,079 workers and caused a loss of 754,046 working days. The corresponding figures in these industries in 1938 stood at 195 strikes with 78,631 participants and a loss of 1,306,433 working days. The trade union actions of the workers of these small and unorganized industries during the period under review were no doubt memorable events in the history of Indian labour.

Thirdly, a very special characteristic of the strikes of the

period 1937-38 was noticed in their offensive character in direct contrast to those of the years 1928-29 which were mostly defensive in nature. This time the workers fought not only for restoration of the cut in wages that was effected during the slump years but they directly demanded wage-increase and cried halt to the retrenchment and repressive measures. Although the ruinous effects of the world depression were on the wayout, the mill-owners, whether native or foreign refused to concede the legitimate economic demands of the workers. In 1937 and 1938 238 and 212 strikes were conducted respectively only on the demands of wage-increase and bonus.

Fourthly, the strikes of this period were successful in majority of the cases. At least 50 per cent of the strikes ended with satisfactory settlements and this marked a contrast with what happened in the preceding years.

Fifthly, a distinctive trait of the strikes of this period was noticed in the forceful demand raised by the workers for recognition of their unions simultaneously with raising of their economic demands.

This period witnessed a determined resistance and solidarity action of the working class against victimization and other repressive actions. With sharply developed class-consciousness and class-solidarity the workers fought unitedly in defence of their trade union rights. Women workers too joined these struggles in greater numbers. Moreover, during this period large number of new activists sprang up from the workers to take charge of the quickly developing struggles. All these symptoms markedly manifested during the textile workers' strike at Kanpur and the jute workers strike in Bengal.

These powerful proletarian actions merged in the stream of national-political struggle of the country and invigorated it considerably.

The attitude of the Congress and non-Congress provincial ministries towards the rising working-class struggles was quite in conformity with their class compositions. These ministries though harped on a number of assurances for some social reforms to ameliorate the plight of the workers and peasants, in effect were more keen in forestalling the working-class and peasant struggles whenever organized for implementation of the said assurances or for implementation of any other economic

demand that affected the interests of the capitalists and landlords. When the national liberation struggle of the country demanded a broad united front of all the anti-imperialist forces of the country, these ministries were out to cripple the working class, the most consistently revolutionary of all the anti-imperialist forces, by imposition of all sorts of severe restrictions.

The attitude shown by the Congress ministry of Bombay Presidency through introduction of the Industrial Disputes Bill was ominously indicative of what to follow in future.

The working class, however, by this time emerged as an uncompromisingly fighting contingent in the revolutionary struggle of the country. Along with this emergence of the working class as an organized political force, the demand was raised by various trade unions and the radical section of the national movement for lifting the ban on the Communist Party of India. The Communist Party on the other side, even in the condition of illegality started publishing its organ *National Front* and boldly put before the country the necessity of building a united national front against imperialism and fascist danger.

Bombay Industrial Disputes Act 1939 :

The labour policy incorporated in the manifesto of the National Congress in 1937 declared specific assurances to take suitable steps for satisfactory settlement of the labour disputes and to take effective measures for protection of the rights of the workers to form unions and to strike. Even after assumption of office, the Congress ministries in different provinces reiterated the same assurances. Among the provinces under Congress ministries, Bombay was most advanced industrially. On 18 August 1937 the Congress ministry in Bombay made a detailed declaration of their labour policy wherein along with repetition of the assurances for improvement of the living conditions of the workers and introducing social security measures for them, the other aim that was clearly spelled out was 'the intention of the government to promote legislation aiming at the prevention of strikes and lock-outs as far as possible.' This declaration was in direct contradiction to the election pledges of protecting the workers' right to strike. This announcement clearly presaged the Bombay Government's contemplated measures for inhibiting the workers' struggles against the exploitation of capital. It is

to be noted what in independent India has repeatedly been declared to ban 'strike and lock-outs' has its very origin in the measures taken by the Congress ministry of Bombay in subjugated India during the short spell of provincial autonomy. What this ban on 'strike and lockout' actually means in a colony or an independent capitalist country is a ban on *strike only* and nothing more of nothing less—for the simple reason that lock-out is an effective weapon in the armoury of the capitalists for exploitation of the workers which in a capitalist or colonial system the capitalists never part with.

So when in 1938 the Bombay Government introduced the Industrial Disputes Bill in the provincial assembly with the intention of banning strikes, the government was faced with strong protests both inside and outside the Assembly. For long 33 days the Bill was hotly debated upon inside the Assembly while outside the working class of Bombay put up stiff resistance against it through extensive strikes.

The principal anti-labour features which this Bill contained were : (1) to impart a compulsory character to the arbitration machinery in a labour dispute, (2) to illegalize strikes occurring without exhausting the arbitration machinery, (3) to make recognition of the union conditional on the acceptance of the arbitration machinery, (4) to provide more stringent punitive measures for participation in illegal strike than that was provided in Trade Dispute Bill 1929—the punishment of 3 months' imprisonment as provided in the 1929 Bill was extended to 6 months' imprisonment in this Act of 1939.

Indeed by enactment of this Bill the Congress ministry of Bombay accepted a more reactionary version of the Trade Dispute Act of 1929, a most anti-labour handiwork of the imperialist government against which vehement protest and bitter condemnation were voiced throughout the country. This action of the Congress ministry in snatching away the workers' right to strike and rendering it punishable more stringently than that was provided in 1929 Act revealed a nakedly anti-labour attitude of the ministry.

All India Trade Union Congress considered this Bill as reactionary, retrograde, prejudicial and harmful to the interests of the working class and voiced strong protest against it. The one-day protest strike of 90,000 workers which the Bombay

Provincial Trade Union Congress organized against this Black Bill on⁷ November 1939 marked a glorious chapter in the working-class movement of India. Indian Labour Party led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar also supported this strike. The eminent Congress leaders, however, counselled the workers against the strike, but without minding to oblige them, the workers came out to protect their own trade union rights by joining the strike and organizing huge protest demonstration.

The workers who had all along stood by the Congress in the national-political struggle, now became loudly resentful against betrayal of their cause by the same very Congress. The Congress ministry instead of retracing their harmful path, deployed police against the workers who were then mercilessly fired upon and lathi charged. Police firing resulted into death of two workers and against these brutalities the workers burst into mighty protest demonstrations at Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Madras and many other places of the country.

Another intention of the Congress also manifestly came out through the Industrial Disputes Act 1939. Ahmedabad Majoor Mahajan and the compulsory arbitration recognized by it epitomized the ideal of class-collaboration practised by the Congress leaders. Through the Act of 1939 the Congress ministry attempted to foist the same class-collaborationist ideal on the working class of the country. Especially remarkable was the fact that just at that moment in April 1938, Gandhi Sevak Sangh while concluding its conference announced the aim of forming a new labour organization in India after the model of Ahmedabad Majoor Mahajan. At the same time Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel too announced the intention of Congress to form a new labour organization on the Majoor Mahajan model, as AITUC, according to him was acting on the principle of class-struggle. Just 18 years after these declarations, in 1947, the Indian National Trade Union Congress was formed as a rival to AITUC in a convention held at Delhi under the presidency of same Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel. So all these developments of the years 1938-39—the enactment of this Black Bill, the utterances of Gandhi Sevak Sangh and Sardar Patel were in effect nothing but advance preparations for the birth of a class-collaborationist all-India labour organization in 1947.

After assumption of office, activities of Congress remained

mostly confined within the ministry and the Parliamentary sub-committees. Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda, a stalwart of Majoor Mahajan and a very trusted disciple of Gandhiji was appointed as the Parliamentary Secretary of Labour in the Congress ministry of Bombay and thus became a zealous partner of the anti-labour activities of the ministry.

This anti-labour policy of Congress directly contradicted the concept of united national front of all anti-imperialist forces which was most needed at that moment for the successful culmination of the national liberation struggle.

Meanwhile the lengthening shadow of another war changed the entire situation and the British Government did not get any opportunity to implement the federal part of the new Constitution.

Renewed Efforts for Unity :

Since passing of Indian Trade Union Act, 1926 registration of the unions became compulsory. On an industrywise classification it appears that out of the registered unions 84 were in the textile industry with a membership of 69,444. The railways had 57 unions but with a much more membership numbering 158,068. In the G.I.P. Railway the reformist union and the Red Flag union combined to form one union claiming a membership of 20,000. Similarly in the B.B. & C.I. and M.S.M. & S.I. Railway too powerful unions were formed. 27 unions of the municipal workers had 11,698 members while 9 unions of the seamen had as many as 46,057 members. Many unions of the workers in the small and miscellaneous trades and industries like saw-mill, motor-transport, hotel, hair-cutting saloon and similar other trades were registered during this period.

With this increase in the number of registered trade unions during 1937-38, their financial condition also looked up. While in 1936-37 the income shown in the returns of the unions totalled to an amount of Rs. 488,431, the same for the year 1937-38 stood at Rs. 693,444. The unions on the railways and Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association had a better financial position than the other unions.

But the organizational advance of the trade unions was not in proportion to the extension of the struggles that this period witnessed. In many a case, struggles bubbled forth spontane-

ously without giving birth to any organization. Despite this deficiency, there was certainly some advance and according to one estimate during 1938-40, the total number of unions, both registered and unregistered, was about 900 with an approximate membership of 600,000.¹⁰

Sixteenth session of AITUC was held at Delhi on 1-2 January 1938 under the presidency of Mr. Sibnath Banerjee. During this session AITUC claimed affiliation of 98 unions with a membership of 122,050.

This session was highly significant in as much as it made big strides towards forging trade union unity. In this session AITUC formed a sub-committee entrusted with the task of negotiating with the National Trade Union Federation for the purpose of bringing about structural unity between these two organizations. The unity proposal recommended by the National Trade Union Federation which was otherwise known as 'Giri Proposals' was accepted with some modifications as the basis for these unity talks.

This session elected Mr. Sibnath Banerjee as president, Mr. S. A. Dange and Mr. S. V. Ghatge as vice-presidents and Mr. Bankim Mukherjee as general secretary of AITUC for the next term.

Besides the unity proposal, this session adopted two other resolutions—one for observance of 'Protest Day' on 6 March 1938 on the demand of release of the political prisoners and the other for observance of 'All-India Day' on 20 March 1938 demanding lifting of the ban on the Communist Party of India.

AITUC could not accept the 'Giri Proposals' in its entirety and particularly in one point the AITUC had serious differences. The 'Giri Proposals' provided that 'all political questions and the question of strikes should be decided by a three-fourths majority of the executive of the United Trade Union Congress' and AITUC considered this provision as a grave obstacle to the decision making process which could virtually be used as powers of veto to negate any decision at any crucial moment. This, the AITUC considered as a highly undesirable organizational procedure in trade union movement.

But anyway, the political exigencies during 1936-37 had been badly warranting a united platform of the working class. Within AITUC during that period mainly three ideological

groups were functioning—the Communists, the Congress Socialists and the Royists.

In the course of these unity efforts, a joint sitting of the AITUC and the NTUF was held at Nagpur on 17 April 1938 under the presidency of Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee. After thorough deliberations, that sitting accepted the unity proposals. The conditions for restoring unity as laid down by the joint sitting were: (1) National Trade Union Federation as a unit would be affiliated to AITUC, (2) AITUC would accept the constitution of the NTUF, (3) The affiliation of NTUF to AITUC would remain in force for one year, (4) AITUC would not be affiliated to any international organization, but its affiliated units would be free to do so, (5) All political questions and questions of strikes would be decided by three-fourths majority of the General council or Working committee, (6) The official flag of AITUC would be ordinary Red Flag with the letters TUC inscribed in it.

According to the agreement, a new general council was constituted with a total of 88 members, taking 44 from each side. After affiliation of NTUF to AITUC, the total number of unions affiliated to AITUC stood at 188 with membership of 366,456. The new office-bearers elected by the joint sitting were: Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee (NTUF) president, Mr. Aftab Ali (NTUF), Mr. Jamnadas Mehta (NTUF) and Mr. Mukundalal Sarkar (AITUC) vice-presidents, Mr. R. R. Bakhale (NTUF) secretary, Mr. R. S. Mimbkar (AITUC) treasurer, Mr. Bankim Mukherjee (AITUC) and Mr. S. V. Parulekar (AITUC) assistant secretaries.

The two organizations thus combined together, yet with some identifiable entities. But soon the initial reservations were over and full merger became a reality in the year 1940.

The significance of this unity can not be fully grasped only in terms of increase in the number of affiliated unions and their membership. This unity enabled AITUC to play its due role as a central and united organization of the Indian working class in the stormy economic and political battles that followed.

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EVENTFUL COURSE OF WORKING- CLASS STRUGGLES DURING WORLD WAR II 1939-45

Political Perspective :

World WAR II broke out on 3 September 1939. Within a few hours of the outbreak of the War in Europe the viceroy of India without consulting the Indian people proclaimed India as a belligerent. Thus independent of the will of her people, India was dragged into this devastating world conflict.

National Congress had realized the danger posed by the rise of fascism and it came out in condemnation of the bloodsheds and sufferings inflicted upon the peoples of Spain, Ethiopia and Czechoslovakia by the fascist powers. National Congress opposed the fascist trend that was evident in Japan and when she invaded China, Congress did not hesitate to condemn her as aggressor.

To the communists of India it was much easier to realize the danger of fascism and in fact internationally the communists of all countries already put up a resistance against fascism during the very period of its growth. So the communists of India were unequivocally loud in protest against this international enemy while simultaneously being active for building an anti-imperialist United National Front for waging an uncompromising struggle against British imperialism.

These approaches guided the National Congress and the Communist Party of India till the outbreak of the war. But the war altered the international alignment of forces and the situation took a different turn. Advance of the war and the invasion of the Soviet Socialist Republics by the Nazi Germany effected a profound change in the character of this war and thus the earlier assessment of the situation also underwent a radical change.

While proclaiming India as a belligerent, the British imperialists simultaneously rejected the demand of the Indian people for an elected National Constituent Assembly, promulgated "Defence of India" Ordinance enabling the Government of India to rule by decrees, seriously curbed the already limited powers of provincial autonomy by vesting the Governors with authoritative powers to override the provincial ministries and thus betrayed their glaringly autocratic character.

This attitude of the British imperialists caused deep indignation among the people and the first step the National Congress took against this autocratic attitude was resignation from the provincial ministries. And in this situation, invoking the application of Section 93 of the Government of India Act 1935, the provincial Governors took over the administration of the provinces and being reinforced by extraordinary powers ruled over the entire period of the war.

In the first-phase of the war till June 1941 when the war raged only between the Anglo-French imperialists on the one side and the Nazi Germany on the other, the attitude of National Congress, on the whole, was to bargain for transfer of power without causing much embarrassment to the belligerent Britain. Attitude of National Congress towards war centred basically round Great Britain.

But meanwhile, overrunning Poland, Belgium, Holland, Norway, France and major part of the eastern Europe, and totally violating the non-aggression pact between the two countries, in June 1941 Germany invaded Soviet Russia. In December of that year with a lightening attack on the Pearl Harbour, Japan entered the war. By the end of 1941 the blaze of war engulfed the entire world. Soviet Russia and the United States of America joined the Anglo-French Alliance, transforming that into an Alliance of the United Nations and plunged into the war while in the Asian front Japan scored victories after victories and soon overran the Philippines, Indochina, Indonesia, Malaya and Burma. In March 1942 the Japanese army advanced to Rangoon directly threatening the Indian borders. The war entered into its second phase.

In this changed situation of the war, Congress sought to find out a basis for co-operation with the warring Britain on the condition of forming a Provisional National Government in India.

Aiming at resisting Japanese invasion, Britain too was keenly interested in enlisting India's co-operation in her war efforts. In December 1941 the principal Congress leaders were released by the government and this opened the way to a new orientation and advanced the basis of co-operation.

After the fall of Rangoon on 8 March 1942, the British Government announced the Cripps Mission. Headed by Sir Stafford Cripps, a member of the British War Cabinet this Commission visited India in March-April 1942 to discuss the future of the country with the Indian political leaders on the basis of a Draft Declaration drawn up by the War Cabinet. But the post-war proposals which stipulated granting of Dominion Status with the power to secede, framing of the future Constitution of India by virtually vesting the Muslim League and the Princes with veto powers and similar other conditions directly negated the demand for a National Government in India.

Failure of the Cripps Mission proved to be a turning point in the crisis of British-Indian relations during the War. This failure on the one side rendered the masses extremely wrathful and on the other overwhelmed the Indian political leadership with grave disappointment. Frustration leads to desperation and so when in this situation the All India Congress Committee met at Bombay on 8 August 1942 under the leadership of Gandhiji, a draft resolution was adopted asking the British to 'Quit India' and on the programmatic side a 'Do or Die' political slogan was raised asking the people to 'Either free India or die in the attempt'. The draft was expected to be discussed on the next day i.e., August 9, but the meeting could not take place and no formally sanctioned programme could be issued.¹

With the imperialists, political expediency knew no scruples. And following the dictum that surprise and first strike were the keys to success, the British Government decided to strike at once. Early morning on August 9, Gandhiji and all the members of the Working Committee in Bombay were taken into custody. Then arrests followed all over India and a large number of Congressmen were thrown into the prison leaving the organization completely leaderless.

When news about the 'Quit India' resolution and the 'Do or Die' slogan along with the news of the arrest of the leaders

spread throughout India with a lightening speed, the fury of the masses knew no bounds. 'What followed . . . was an outburst of blind anger—unorganized, unprepared and undirected, of a harassed and distracted people. The leaderless masses were moved hither and thither swayed by a multiplicity of influence—the terrorists, the revolutionists, the Forward Block of Subhas Bose who had fled to Berlin, the Socialist followers of Jai Prakash Narayan who were in the Congress but were opposed to non-violence, and a number of nondescript anti-social elements, looking for opportunities for mischief.'² With a spirit of rebellion the masses confronted the troops and the police and bloody clashes ensued; telephone, telegraph, railways, and other government establishments were burnt or uprooted and even the peasantry in some places skirmished with the armed forces.

But the barbarities, the orgy or horrors and the atrocious reprisals that the imperialist government rained over the whole country ultimately succeeded in forcing the rebellious but undirected masses to beat a temporary retreat, yet the fire of revolt could not be quenched, peoples' enthusiasm were irrepressible.

Students, workers, peasants, lower middle class elements—exploited people from all strata joined this rebellious uprising, but the retaliatory savagery perpetrated by the government exceeded all limits. More than ten thousand people met martyrs' death during these maddening upsurges lasting for only few weeks.

Subsequently many have questioned the political sagacity behind this August resolution and the desperate course it directed. But it must be understood that failure of the Cripps Mission left the Congress leadership in a cruel dilemma. Even leaders like Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, who had followed a consistently internationalist and anti-fascist line could not escape this dilemma. They were actually driven to such a desperate course when all their efforts for a full-measure co-operation for defence of the country and the dream of provisional National Government failed. Yet they were afflicted with serious doubts. Mr. Nehru had still wider questions. He was in great doubt whether the country would now to be plunged in a massive upheaval which might result in the defeat of the anti-fascist efforts of the Allies. It was a choice between fighting the impe-

rialist domination of India by Britain and letting down Russia, China and paving the path of fascist victory. In short, politically the August resolution betrayed an utter confusion of purpose and a fatal contradiction on the part of the Congress leadership.

When the resolution was in draft form in July 1942, the Communist Party of India, which represented the anti-fascist working-class section of the national movement had opposed it and had consistently given warning of the possible outcome. Till June 1941 the Communist Party of India followed the political line of opposing the imperialist war and co-operated with Congress in anti-war efforts. They were consistently following the line of building anti-imperialist United National Front for fighting British imperialism. But when invasion of Soviet Russia by Nazi Germany and the formation of United Nations Alliance for resisting fascist aggression brought about a basic change in the character of the war, when the 'Imperialist war' was transformed into 'Peoples' War' the Communist Party of India too changed its earlier political slogan of opposing the war and instead raised the slogan of whole-hearted co-operation with the 'Peoples' War'. The Party advocated building of United National Front in India, including the unity of the Congress, the Muslim League and all other political sections, on a common platform of resistance to fascism and simultaneously pressed for the demand of National Government with the united support of all sections. Thus the Party while urged upon the working class to co-operate with the war efforts and strengthen national defence against fascist aggression also called upon them to fight for the national demands. The Party also campaigned against the arrest of the Congress leaders and the repression and violence let loose by the British Government. Yet in the condition of an embittered national feeling and adamant refusal of the demand for National Government by the British imperialists and in the absence of an active participation by the Party in the struggle against refusal to form a National Government, the policy of the Party, though fundamentally correct, could not win the support of the bulk of the national movement. Shunning its exaggerated apprehension that any such struggle against the British would weaken the war efforts of the Soviet side and hamper its victory in the anti-fascist war, the Party

should have organized active struggle for the demand of National Government and that could have enlisted the support of the bulk of the anti-imperialist masses behind the Party's basically correct line. The working class movement of India during the period from 1935 to 1945 is therefore to be judged in this highly complicated political perspective.

*Repercussions of the War on Economic
Front and Conditions of the Working Class :*

The involvement of a colonial country in a 'total war' is inevitably fraught with many ruinous consequences. The manner in which the British Government sought to reorient the economy of colonial India precluded even the least concern for the interests of the Indian people and instead expediency of the war was taken to be the only point of consideration in all their economic activities in India. Truly, this resulted in an augmentation of industrial production and solely directed as it was towards aiding the war efforts, this did not at all bring any improvement in the living or working conditions of the workers, on the contrary an immeasurable burden threatened to crush them.

For increasing production, the industrial units introduced double shift to triple shift of work. Night shift became almost universal, in many cases daily hours of work were also increased and leave facilities curtailed, and exemption of the owners from the provisions of the Factory Act also became a common practice in the industrial life of the country. Reinforced with this exemption of the statutory provisions, the owners increased the working hours in the jute, engineering, chemical, match and similar other industries directly catering to the war needs. The workers in these industries were made to work from 10 to 12 hours a day while in many other industrial units which remained outside the purview of any legal control, the workers were forced to work 56 to 72 hours a week.³

The conditions existing in the various small factories that sprang up in the wake of the war were particularly miserable. Many industrial units were even handed over to the control of the military. Employment of child labour too was resumed in many jute mills. Even the existing restrictions on employment of women labour for underground work in the mines

were lifted.

This enhanced pressure of work, relaxations or altogether lifting of the existing restrictions combined with scant regard for their safety exposed the workers to a greater amount of risk of accidents and in fact a sharply ascendant rate of industrial accidents was evident since 1939. While the number of accidents amounted to 36,006 in 1939, the same for 1945 stood at 70,123. This estimate covered those factories only which came under the purview of the Factory Act, and besides that there were obviously many more accidents. Admitting the fact of this accentuated rate of accidents, an official report itself stated,⁴ 'A rise in the rate of accidents is specially noticeable since 1939. The rate of accidents per thousand workers rose from 20.56 in 1939 to 26.69 in 1944. The increase in the rate has been largely due to the increased activity in the various industries due to war. The main factors responsible for higher accident rate are congestion in factories, influx of new and inexperienced workers, longer hours of work. In some of the provinces difficulties were also created due to shortage of material for safeguarding machinery.'

Along with speed-up, longer hours and a callous indifference to the safety of the workers, the Government of India imposed upon them various war-time emergency measures.

In June 1940, the Governor General in Council promulgated National Service (Technical Personnel) Ordinance and its area of operation was stage by stage expanded by introducing successive amendments to it in 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943 and again in 1944. This Ordinance empowered the government to forcibly employ any skilled or unskilled worker in the age-group of 18 and then 17 to 50 years in various services designated as 'National Service'. Any factory whose production catered to the needs of the war could be declared as a factory of national importance. In order to enforce this Ordinance a National Service Tribunal vested with all the powers and authorities of a Civil Court was instituted and for violation of the injunction of the Ordinance a punitive measure amounting to maximum 6 months' imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 1000/- was provided.

The other Ordinances that were promulgated and concerned the workers and the employees were: The Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance 1941, The Motor Vehicle

Drivers' Ordinance 1942, and The Railway Employment Military Personnel Ordinance 1942. Besides these Ordinances, under clause 78A of the Defence of India Rules, specially authorized officers were appointed who could requisition the services of any male adult and make them work in a specified zone and on a fixed wage for defence or rehabilitation purposes.⁵

During the war a number of industries, mainly iron, steel, coal, cement, paper and some others, which served the needs of the war, were put under government control with a view to harness the maximum capacity for obtaining maximum production. The prices of these industrial production were particularly put under strict regulations.

But this control on production and its prices was not accompanied with formulation of any corresponding labour policy regulating the wages and other conditions of service of the workers. This left the workers completely at the mercy of the scheming capitalists who on the plea of officially imposed control on profits sought to negate all legitimate demands of the workers.

Furthermore, the autocratic provisions of the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance divested the workers of their free will to leave work. Under these provisions, leaving work or abstaining from it were considered to be punishable offence. Besides, if the owners declared any strike in any establishment illegal, that declaration too was held to be a lawful order and the offending workers were liable to fine or imprisonment. Till 1945, 3000 workers were so punished under this Ordinance.⁶

Severe attack was directed on the workers' right to strike. In spite of the Industrial Disputes Act 1929 and the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act 1939 which were purported to make arbitration in industrial disputes virtually compulsory, the government further invoked article 81A of the Defence of India Rules to make arbitration altogether compulsory. All these official regulations were thus designed to completely blunt the edge of the workers' striking power and to immobilize them in the face of the rising capitalist offensive.

The economic conditions of the workers were already miserable in the pre-war period, the war only made it further worse. The condition of the coal mining and plantation workers were particularly pitiful. The wage-rates of the 300,000

coal mining workers of India registered a steady fall between the period 1929 and 1936. The wage-rates however started moving in the opposite direction since 1936. Yet the average wages as were obtainable in 1942 stood below even that of 1929.⁷ Daily wages of the mining workers varied between 8 annas and 12 annas only.

Likewise in the plantations the workers were forced to work and live virtually in a state of serfdom. Their rates of wages in 1945-46 were lower even than that of 1929-30.⁸ Noticeably during 1929-30 itself their monthly wages varied between Rs. 3 and Rs. 8 only which were in fact below subsistence level while the war brought about a further worsening of this already pitiable wage-condition.

In other organized industries although the wage-level registered a rise during the war, the corresponding rise in prices at higher rates resulted actually in a fall in the real wages of the workers. Moreover, the inflationary condition set off by rampant hoarding and black-marketing resorted to by the trading community during the war resulted in an abnormal rise in prices seriously affecting the standard of living of the workers.

In the cotton textile industry the yearly wages of the workers averaged Rs. 320 in the year 1939 while in 1946 the same stood at Rs. 721.8 indicating a rise of 124.4 per cent during these years.⁹ But the corresponding rise in the cost of living indices during this period was much higher than the rate of wage-increase. Taking 1939 as the base year, the cost of living indices in the year 1946 in the three industrial centres of Bombay, Ahmedabad and Sholapur stood at 246, 286 and 290 respectively which meant a fall in the real wages of the workers during the period.¹⁰

The textile workers of Madras although enjoyed the highest rise in wages during this period in comparison to other centres, their abysmally low wages at the start kept them still lagging behind other centres in respect of wage-rates.

In Bengal the wages of the jute and cotton textile workers averaged yearly Rs. 253 in the year 1939 while in 1946 the same stood at Rs. 438 marking a rise of 88 per cent only. The jute workers of Bengal were abnormally low paid from the beginning and during the war also the rise in the wages were comparatively lower although the prices of the food articles and

other necessities of life almost tripled in Bengal during the period from 1939 to 1946.

In engineering, railway workshops, dock and similar other industries the wages of the workers registered a rise of about 164 per cent during the same period.

In the steel industry of Jamshedpur the minimum wage of the workers was below Rs. 20 and their wages inclusive of bonus marked a rise of 66 per cent in 1946 in relation to that of the year 1939.¹¹ Curiously revealing the chaotic character of the wage-condition in India, the wages of the workers of the steel industry were at least 15 per cent lower than that existing in the textile industry.

During the war the total number of railwaymen in India numbered about 900,000 out of whom 80 per cent were in the lower grades. During the world depression their wages were cut and in 1944 the minimum and maximum wages of the railway workers varied between Rs. 10 and Rs. 12, and Rs. 16 and Rs. 34 respectively. In 1939 the average yearly income of a railway worker stood at Rs. 541 only and the amount by which the wages were enhanced till the year 1946 was much lower than that in the textile and even in metal industries.¹²

Without going into further details it can be assumed from what has been discussed above that inspite of a rise in the total sum of the wages during the war period, the abnormal rise in prices and the inflationary condition had not only offset that rise in the wages but in actual practice had resulted in a fall in the real wages of the workers.

But in direct contrast to this fall in the real wages of the workers, the capitalists whether native or foreign in the jute, textile, paper, steel, coal, cement and other principal industries had reaped enormous profits at much increased rates taking advantage of the demands of the war.

The following two tables graphically represent the sharply contrasting states of affairs existing in the domains of the real income of the workers and the profits earned by the capitalists during the period of the war.

Index of Profits during 1940-45¹³
(1939 = 100)

Year	All Industries	Jute	Cotton	Paper	Iron & Steel	Coal	Cement
1940	138.0	359.1	142.5	263.3	103.8	100.8	102.8
1941	187.0	344.4	316.6	284.7	133.7	82.6	128.8
1942	221.8	351.1	491.3	321.7	110.1	80.5	169.1
1943	245.0	276.3	640.0	352.8	111.8	95.6	147.9
1944	238.9	310.6	492.1	271.5	117.8	237.0	214.4
1945	233.6	327.6	423.3	279.5	120.2	258.2	216.6

The above table indicates that in various industries the amount of profits earned by the capitalists almost doubled or trebled during the period of the war.

Index of Real Earnings of Workers during 1939-45¹⁴

Year	Index of earnings	All India Consumers' Price Index	Index of real earnings
1939	...	100	100
1940	...	105.3	108.6
1941	...	111.0	103.7
1942	...	129.1	89.0
1943	...	179.6	37.0
1944	...	202.1	75.1
1945	...	210.5	74.9

The foregoing table indicates a sharp fall in the real incomes of the workers since the year 1942.

This fall in real earnings of the industrial workers combined with the inconceivably low wages of the landless labourers during the war-period points out a inhumanly colonial treatment meted out to the Indian toiling masses particularly at a time when the country had been arbitrarily dragged into a bloody world war by the British imperialists. Thus while the toiling masses were forced to bear the scourge of the war. While price-rise, scarcity, hoarding and black marketing made a hell of their lives with not less than two million poor people made to die of hunger during the war-time famine in Bengal, the capitalists of India whether native or foreign were presented with the

El Dorado of immense fortunes and that was what in sum the devilish rule of British imperialism brought for India.

Dearness Allowance :

The war-time increase of wages as discussed above was inclusive of basic wage, dearness allowance and bonus i.e., all the components of earnings of a worker. The 'basic wage' of an Indian worker neither did in the past nor do even now connote any scientific principle or any principle based on the needs of the worker. In India 'basic wage' of a worker represent only a temporary balance struck by the unceasing clashes between the two antagonistic forces—one, the owners' thirst for profit and the other, the workers' resistance. The 'basic wage' of workers in different industries therefore varies according to the intensity and success of the workers' resistance in the given industries. This means that the 'basic wage' in a particular industry in India was determined in the past and is still largely determined by the amount of struggle put in by the workers of that industry. This explains the phenomenon of comparatively lower wages of the workers of Indian steel industry and the comparatively higher wages in the textile industries of Bombay. Obviously this process has resulted in a total chaos and inequity in the wage structures of the workers in different industries.

Till the out-break of the World War II, the workers secured increase in their basic wages. But since the out-break of the war in September 1939, instead of enhancing the basic wages of the workers as was previously done in India or as is being still done in the European countries, in India, a separate component of 'Dearness Allowance' was created and added to the workers' wages purporting to compensate the fall in the real wages caused by the rise in the cost of living index.

The Indian workers' struggle for wage-increase assumed a wider form during the war. AITUC and its provincial branches raised the general demand of increase in wages for compensating the tremendous rise in prices. The unions of the workers and employees in the government establishments, railways, ports, docks, municipalities and other institutions also voiced a similar demand. The TUC in Bombay formed an Action Committee comprising various labour leaders to fight for increase in wages

as a compensation to the rise in prices. The first strike of the Indian workers demanding dearness allowance was held in Bombay. On 5 March 1940, 175,000 textile workers of Bombay struck work on this demand. In the war-time inflationary condition wage-increase became an universal demand. But even that dearness allowance which the owners were forced to grant under pressure of movement had no parity either. Not only from centre to centre, the rate of dearness allowance varied from industry to industry and even from factory to factory. The workers secured dearness allowance in some cases even through official arbitration.

Further, the rate of dearness allowance was not connected with the cost of living index. In one or two cases, where some connections were established, there too full compensation of the price-rise was never granted. In consequence, the workers' wages always lagged behind the prices. The textile workers of Bombay succeeded in securing comparatively higher rate of dearness allowance and in 1944 they secured the highest amount on this score. Even in that industry as against the cost of living index reaching 250 in the city of Bombay, the workers were granted a compensation of 66.67 per cent only by way of dearness allowance.

The fall in the real wages and want of full compensation thereof forced the workers to a lower standard of living. Their purchasing power came down drastically. And so, during the war the workers had to engage themselves in sharp class battles against those unbearable hardships and to secure financial and other concessions.

Workers' Struggles :

In a condition of scarcity and high prices that was created with the outbreak of the war, the working class of India had to wage struggles for protecting its existing standard of living. So the working class embarked on a series of strike struggles in Bombay, Kanpur, Calcutta, Bangalore, Jamshedpur, Dhanbad, Jharia, Nagpur, Madras, Digboi of Assam or in a word, throughout the entire country. The following table is indicative of the intensity and sweep of the strikes that occurred since 1939.

Industrial Disputes 1939-45

Year	Number of strikes and lockouts	Number of workers involved	Number of working days lost
1939	... 406	409,189	4,992,795
1940	... 322	452,539	7,577,281
1941	... 359	291,054	3,330,503
1942	... 694	772,653	5,779,965
1943	... 716	525,088	2,342,287
1944	... 658	550,015	3,477,306
1945	... 848	782,196	3,340,892

It appears from the above table that the number of strikes was less during 1940 and 1941, although in 1940 in spite of a lesser number of strikes, the number of working days lost reached the highest mark.

Since the outbreak of the war, the greatest proletarian action in India was the anti-war strike which was organized in Bombay on 2 October 1939 and was joined by 90,000 workers. This strike of the Bombay workers was crowned with special significance as being the first anti-war strike in the world working-class movement.

This event along with other struggles indicate that during this period the outlook of the Indian working class did not remain confined solely within the four walls of economic demands. The working class rather fully kept pace with the national and international political developments and played an active rôle in the political struggles.

The general strike of 175,000 textile workers of Bombay which commenced on 5 March 1940 marked the beginning of the Indian workers' struggle for dearness allowance. This strike high-lighted the demand of dearness allowance and countrywide struggles followed in its train. The government referred the question of dearness allowance of the textile workers to an Arbitration Board but the recommendation of the Board was not acceptable to the workers. The Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag) then decided for a general strike and an action committee was formed for the purpose. On March 5, the strike engulfed all the mills. The government at once issued orders prohibiting meetings and demonstrations and arrested Mr. S. A. Dange and

Mr. B. T. Ranadive under Defence of India Rules. Police repression was let loose and the workers were fired upon and lathi-charged. The Girni Kamgar Union then appealed for popular support to the workers' struggle. A relief committee was formed and contributions were raised from the people. The Bombay Provincial Congress Committee refused to support the workers' struggle because of their non-acceptance of the arbitration award. But AITUC called for a general strike in Bombay in support of the textile workers' strike and on March 10, the general strike occurred with the participation of 300,000 workers. The owners however, maintained a very unyielding attitude on this question and their position was strengthened by the active support of the government and in that condition the strike was called off on April 13. This left the owners free to introduce dearness allowance at the low rates recommended by the Arbitration Board against which the workers fought so gallantly.

In 1940 strikes occurred in different jute mills of Bengal and the workers succeeded in securing a ten per cent wage-rise. In May of that year, 20,000 workers of Calcutta Corporation struck work on the demand of dearness allowance. The strike was subsequently withdrawn on assurances of settlement of demands, no victimization and formation of an Enquiry Committee along with the representatives of the labour. But later, the authorities violated the agreement and even went to the length of dismissing 6 workers and putting under suspension as many as 76 others. From 1940 to 1943 the jute workers of Bengal again participated in a number of strikes on the demands of dearness allowance, war allowance and similar other demands. The workers also fought against forced deduction of contributions to the war fund from their wage-bills. Among the jute workers' strikes, most remarkable were: the strike of 9,000 workers of Baranagar Jute Mills in May 1941, the strike of 12,000 workers in Anglo-Indian Jute Mills in July of that year, the strike of 4,500 workers in Hastings Jute Mills in 1942, and strike of 15,000 workers in Andrew Yule Mills and the strikes of 20,000 workers in Lawrence, Hukumchand, and two other mills during the same period.

25 per cent wage-rise in the form of war allowance was the principal slogan prompting those strikes.

During 1939-40 strikes in the cotton mills of Narayangunge in the district of Dacca were specially remarkable. Strikes of 2000 workers in the shoe making industry in 1941, strike of 1,600 workers of Bhartia Electric Steel Works on the demand of bonus in the same year, strike of 2,000 workers of the Calcutta Tramways in 1942 on the demands of 25 per cent dearness allowance and reinstatement of the dismissed colleagues and in the same year strike of 2,000 port workers on the demand of dearness allowance and strike of 8,000 workers of Calcutta Corporation on the demands of dearness allowance and supply of foodgrains at fair prices were also quite remarkable.

In 1940 at Ahmedabad, Majoor Mahajan served a strike notice on the mill-owners demanding introduction of dearness allowance in accordance with the recommendations of the Arbitration Board, but ultimately a settlement was arrived at through official intervention and the strike did not materialize. When Gandhiji was arrested in 1942 following the 'Quit India' resolution, the workers of Ahmedabad struck work against his arrest. Majoor Mahajan supported this movement, and the mill-owners too who were staunch supporters of Gandhiji co-operated with the workers and kept their mills closed. But when the August Movement subsided the owners opened the mills and the workers joined their work. This struggle of the Ahmedabad workers occurred completely under bourgeois influence.

During 1941-43 a number of strikes occurred in the Nagpur Empress Mills and Model Mills. 8,000 workers joined these strikes on the demands of wage-rise and dearness allowance.

In 1941 the textile workers of Bangalore participated in a strike on the demands of bonus, and reinstatement of the dismissed colleagues which lasted for 75 days and ended in success. In 1942 also, the workers of Bangalore joined strikes supporting 'Quit India' movement.

In 1942 the workers of the Carnatic Mills of Madras observed stay-in-strike. Workers of 7 mills of Indore also joined a strike lasting for 13 days.

In October 1939, 30,000 workers of Kanpur struck work. Another strike occurred at Kanpur in 1940 on the demand of dearness allowance.

In 1939, the workers of Assam Oil Company at Digboi

joined in a notable strike lasting for 8 months. A coalition Congress ministry which was in office at Assam during that time appointed a Court of Enquiry to go into the dispute. All India Congress Committee also adopted a resolution supporting the strike. The strike of the workers at Tatanagar which occurred in 1940 was also noteworthy.

The stay-in-strike of 6,000 workers in the Parel Workshop of G.I.P. Railway which commenced on November 1941 was particularly worth mentioning. During 1942-43 also strikes occurred in the same Parel Workshop and in the Lower Parel Workshop of B.B. & C.I. Railway on the demand of supply of foodgrains at fair prices.

The foregoing is merely a sketchy discussion on the important proletarian actions during the period, besides which, many more strikes occurred in different industrial centres of the country in the period under review.

Government Offensive :

With the out-break of the war when the entire working class of the country marched on to the path of struggle, the imperialist government directed severe attacks to forestall it. The government concentrated their attacks on the communists—the vital force of the Indian labour movement. *National Front*, the organ of the Communist Party was declared illegal and a very large number of communists and other radical elements were rounded up throughout the country. In January 1941 Mr. Reginald Maxwell, the Home Member declared that of the 700 who were imprisoned without trial 'about 480 persons were almost without exception, either acknowledged communists or else active supporters of the communist programme of violent mass revolution'. A number of 6,466 political and trade union workers were convicted and over 1,664 were either externed, interned or restricted in other ways.¹⁵

To what extent the imperialist government felt concerned at the growing movement of the working class under the guidance of the communists is revealed from Central Intelligence Report on the labour activities at Bombay. The report states,¹⁶ 'The Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag) has become very active and notices are being issued to the various mills demanding a 25 per cent wage increase, more dearness allow-

ance etc. At the same time meetings are being held and secret propaganda is being conducted by the communists with a view to fomenting a general strike. If industrial peace is to be maintained, I am strongly of the opinion that the communist group of G.K.U. should be arrested and detained without delay. It would, I think, be a serious mistake to allow the communists to progress any further, because, once the peace of the labour world is disturbed it would take a long time to restore order, and the war effort would be hampered to that extent. I would advise immediate action by the government as the situation is fast deteriorating. The strike in the Victoria, Madhusudan, Century and Digvijay Mills are pointers to the coming storm'. And so the government attacked the communists.

Along with this government offensive on the communists, the leadership of the Congress Socialist Group also indulged in anti-communist tirade, although at the same time many militant socialist workers joined the unlawful Communist Party.

With the transformation of the Imperialist War into Peoples' War, when the communists embarked upon the policy of co-operating with the war efforts against fascist aggression, the attack of the socialists on the Communist Party became more virulent. But in the changed context of the war the Communist Party and the advanced section of the working class instead of going into the path of industrial strikes, fully devoted themselves to the task of national defence against fascist aggression. Yet at the same time, in defence of the workers against capitalist exploitation, the communists organized numerous working-class struggles on several partial demands. But as multiplicity of influence right from national-bourgeois to Congress-Socialism was working upon them, the working class in its entirety could not on all occasions correctly follow the 'no-strike' policy of the communists and in consequence a sizeable section of the working class and middle class elements got alienated from the communists during this time.

Yet neither this total offensive of the government, nor the barrage of calumny indulged in by the bourgeois-nationalists and the socialists succeeded in diminishing the rôle of the Communist Party as the vanguard and the most organized detachment of the working class and the alienation observed during the time soon proved ephemeral giving place to greater

attachment for the Party.

AITUC during the War:

Restoration of trade union unity that appeared as a real prospect in April 1938, assumed a full and galvanized form in September 1940 with the passage of a period of two and half years full of working-class activities.

The eighteenth session of the AITUC was held at Bombay on 28-30 September 1940 presided over by Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee and attended by 159 delegates. The general council which met on the eve of the conference decided for the merger of AITUC and NTUF on the conditions laid down by the joint sitting of the two organizations in April 1938. After the merger, all unions of the NTUF became automatically the affiliates of the AITUC and all assets and liabilities of the NTUF were transferred to the AITUC. Thus on restoration of complete unity, the number of affiliated unions of the AITUC stood at 195 with a total membership of 374,256.

Till this conference, the AITUC had no clear policy decision in regard to the war. While commenting on the attitude the working class should adopt, the president of the session Dr. Banerjee pleaded that the workers should move in full co-operation with the National Congress and in this connection he specially mentioned Gandhiji's leadership of Congress. Mr. V. V. Giri moved a resolution in the conference on the issue of war wherein it was stated, 'As the present war between Great Britain on the one side and the Fascist Powers on the other is claimed by Britain to be waged for the vindication of the principles of freedom and democracy and not for any imperialist purposes, India without having any sympathy for either imperialism or Fascism, naturally claims for herself freedom and a democratic government before she can be expected to take part in the War-Participation; in a war which will not result in the establishment of freedom and democracy in India, will not benefit India, much less will it benefit the working classes in India'.

This resolution actually reflected the attitude of the National Congress towards the war. Mr. Aftab Ali moved an amendment to the resolution stating that, 'in view, however, of the fact that the AITUC consists of various shades of opinion and the attitude to war is a vital question of unique nature, there-

fore with a view to preserving the unity and solidarity of the Trade Union Congress, essential to the working classes, it is decided that differing groups within the organization, if they so desire, may advocate their own special viewpoint.' Mr. Aftab Ali was actually in favour of extending full support to the war.

Subsequently after prolonged discussions, the amendment was withdrawn and the resolution moved by Mr. Giri was accepted.

This session elected Mr. V. R. Kalappa and Mr. N. M. Joshi as president and general secretary respectively for the next term.

Meanwhile, violating Soviet-German Non-aggression Pact the Nazi Germany had invaded the Soviet land changing the entire character of the war. The general council of AITUC which met at Nagpur in this new situation on 6 July 1941 again discussed the issue of war. But though the council was in general sympathetic with the Soviet Union in her defence against Nazi aggression, it did not suggest any positive rôle to be played by the AITUC in this regard. Crippled with this ambivalence, the general council kept the resolution adopted at Bombay session in this regard unaltered.

Meanwhile, disagreeing with the AITUC's resolution on war adopted in Bombay session, Mr. M. N. Roy, Miss Moniben Kara, Mr. V. B. Karnik and several other followers of Mr. Roy seceded from the AITUC. Indian Seamen's Union of Calcutta too abandoned AITUC on this score. Mr. M. N. Roy and his followers advocated whole-hearted co-operation with the British Government on the issue of war. They held an Anti-Fascist conference at Lahore at the end of 1941 and formed a new organization—Indian Labour Federation with Mr. M. N. Roy as secretary and Mr. Jamnadas Mehta, a trusted man of the railway administration, as its president.

Mr. Roy and his followers then directly plunged into the rôle of active accomplices of the British Government. The allegation that they were provided with a monthly grant of Rs. 13,000 for conducting propaganda in favour of the British Government was also confirmed during an official reply to a question in the Central Legislative Assembly on 4 April 1944. Satisfied with the work of the Indian Labour Federation, the Labour Member of the Assembly gleefully stated that 'the

expenditure achieved the object for which it was sanctioned.' The ILF published no accounts of the money it received from the government, although the Labour Member assured the Assembly that the accounts would be prepared by the Federation and would be available in future. Besides this direct monetary contribution, the government patronized and subsidized the daily paper run by Mr. Roy by making a bulk purchase of 1500 copies of the paper each day. Subsequently the government went further in extending official recognition to this blessed IFL as a national centre of labour of representative character parallel to AITUC. To reciprocate this favour this organization then started forming rival unions in different places with official assistance and patronage.

The nineteenth session of the AITUC was held at Kanpur on 8-9 February 1942 under the presidentship of Mr. V. R. Kalappa. Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru attended this session as a special invitee. Meanwhile, the communists had adopted a changed outlook towards the war. But there were others who stuck to the political line of National Congress in this regard. So the most important event of this session was the placing of two different resolutions pertaining to the attitude of AITUC towards war. On behalf of the communists Mr. Bankim Mukherjee moved a resolution advocating unconditional support to the war efforts of the United Nations Alliance placing simultaneously also a charter of national demands for certain improvements of a political and economic nature in order to make the war effective and enthusiastic. Mr. Mrinal Kanti Bose moved an alternative resolution expressing the opinion that in order to enable the workers of India to take part enthusiastically and effectively in the defence of India and for that purpose to co-operate with other nations, immediate transfer of power was absolutely essential. Both these resolutions were placed before the House for consideration.

The resolution moved by Mr. Bankim Mukherjee although received majority support, failed to secure the support of three-fourths majority. The conditions to the effect that all political questions and questions of strikes and international affiliation would have to be decided by three-fourths majority, as were laid down in the unity conference of 1938, now stood as a veritable obstacle in the way of AITUC's taking a definite and

correct political line in a crucial juncture of world history. The alternative resolution of Mr. Mrinal Kanti Bose also fell through and in consequence even at a moment when the Indian borders were threatened by the fascist invaders, the attitude of AITUC towards war remained the same as it was in 1940 although what was reality in 1940 turned out to be an absurdity in 1942.

However, the resolutions adopted by the session while demanded of the government fulfilment of the minimum needs of the workers, controlling prices and granting bonus to compensate the rising cost of living, called upon the workers to remain firm and stick to their posts in the emergency condition of war. The session also by a resolution mentioned the necessity of establishing co-operation between the government, the owners and the trade unions in the direction of production.

The government was also eager for enlisting the co-operation of the workers. In 1942 the Government of India announced the decision of constituting a tri-partite body and in accordance thereof the first Indian Labour Conference was held at New Delhi in August 1942.

Having failed to evolve a positive attitude and a definite line of action in regard to war, different groups within AITUC began functioning according to their own outlook. Although handicapped with indecision on the main issue, the AITUC refused to co-operate with the tri-partite conference and recorded loud protests against official repression. The communists too tried to mobilize the workers and the common masses against hoarding, black-marketing etc. practised by the trading community as well as against the repression launched by the imperialist government. In consonance with this attitude 'Anti-Repression Day' was observed on 25 September 1942 at the call of AITUC.

This session elected Mr. V. V. Giri and Mr. N. M. Joshi as president and general secretary respectively of AITUC for the next term. A total of 182 union with a membership of 337,695 were affiliated to AITUC during this time.

Twentieth session of AITUC was held at Nagpur on 1-3 May 1943 under the presidency of Mr. Charu Chandra Banerjee in absence of Mr. V. V. Giri. The government put a ban on allowing visitors and holding mass meetings. For non-co-operation with the war efforts even in the second phase of the

war, most of the Congress and socialist members of AITUC were kept detained during that time. Having forced to remain unlawful for long eight years, the ban on the Communist Party of India was lifted in this changed situation. The Communist Party began functioning legally which indicated a significant success on the part of the working class.

Two political resolutions were moved in this session—one by Mr. Somnath Lahiri and the other by Mr. V. R. Kalappa. Mr. Lahiri's resolution urged upon all political parties and organizations to accept the principles of self-determination with a view to dispelling the doubts and suspicions from the Muslims for achieving National Government. Mr. Kalappa's resolution stated that in the event of the government persisting in its refusal to transfer power, the AITUC should urge upon the political parties to devise sanctions in order to enforce national demands. The former resolution secured 78 votes in favour and 57 against, while the latter secured 47 votes in favour. Both the resolutions fell through in the absence of three-fourths majority in favour.

Mr. Dange and Mr. N. M. Joshi were elected president and general secretary respectively of AITUC in this session. A total of 306 delegates representing 155 unions attended this session although during this time 259 unions with a membership of 332,079 were affiliated to AITUC.

The twentyfirst session of the AITUC was held at Madras on 18-23 January 1945 under the presidentship of Mr. Fazal Ilahi Kurbani in the absence of Mr. S. A. Dange. The war was then in its last phase. In this situation the session unanimously adopted a political resolution emphasizing the need for attainment of National Freedom. The session adopted another resolution demanding release of the Congress leaders.

One of the important features of the Madras session was the unanimity that prevailed between different ideological groups within AITUC in the matter of adoption of resolutions and acceptance of agreed proposals for elections and in transaction of other business. Some amendments to the Constitution were also adopted by this session.

The affiliated unions of AITUC commanded a total membership of 451,915 during this time.

While the war was approaching an end, in February 1945:

the World Trade Union Congress was convened in London in order to discuss and decide the attitude of the trade unions towards peace-settlements, representation of the trade unions at the peace conference, immediate working-class demands for post-war reconstruction and also to form the World Federation of Trade Unions. A delegation consisting of Mr. S. A. Dange and others participated in the World Conference on behalf of AITUC. Subsequently in September-October of that year the World Trade Union Congress was held at Paris in which the World Federation of Trade Unions was born. Since then the AITUC remained an affiliate of the WFTU.

Organizational Advance :

Trade Union movement of India made remarkable organizational advance during the period under review. While the number of unions registered under Indian Trade Union Act 1926 was 568 during 1938-39, the same for the period 1945-46 stood at 1087. The membership also registered an increase from 399,159 to 864,031 during that period according to the returns submitted. The following table indicates this advance both in respect of the number of unions and their membership.

Registered Unions and Membership

Year	No. of Unions	Membership
1937-38	...	420
1938-39	...	568
1939-40	...	667
1940-41	...	727
1941-42	...	747
1942-43	...	693
1943-44	...	761
1944-45	...	865
1945-46	...	1,087
1946-47	...	1,225

The membership noted in the above table indicates the membership of those unions only which submitted annual returns to the government. Many of the registered unions having failed to submit returns, their membership could not obviously be taken into account while preparing the above statistics. For instance, while the number of registered unions during 1945-46 was actually 1,087, of these only 585 unions submitted returns.

Besides, there were many other unions which were not registered at all. In the tea plantations, in the hand-looms and in several other small and cottage industries there existed a number of unregistered unions. So the actual number of workers enrolled by both the registered and unregistered unions was much more than what had been shown in the official statistics.

Moreover, during the war trade union membership increased considerably in almost all branches of industries. The highest increase was evident in the Engineering industry—while the Tramways, Dockyard and Port Trust came next in order. The following table indicates the growth of membership of the unions classified by industries.

Class of Industry	1937-38	1944-45
1. Railways and other Communications excluding Tramways ...	158,068	304,486
2. Tramways ...	2,425	10,390
3. Textiles ...	69,444	210,712
4. Printing Presses ...	6,566	13,560
5. Municipal ...	11,698	11,928
6. Seamen ...	46,057	79,501
7. Dockyards and Port Trusts ...	16,047	37,098
8. Metal and Engineering ...	3,505	35,513
9. Miscellaneous ...	76,302	186,200
Total...	390,112	889,388

These are conservative official figures and cannot be assumed as comprehensive. Yet it indicates the trend of war-time growth of union membership in different branches of industries. Another mentionable fact was the rise in the number of women members during the period. While the number of women members of all registered unions submitting returns stood at 14,703 during 1937-38, the number rose to 36,570 during 1944-45.

Paradoxically, when the Indian trade union movement had been making such rapid strides simultaneously heightening the prestige of AITUC as the representative national centre of the Indian labour, the colonial government started giving official predominance to their pet and patronized Indian Labour Federation. The government graciously favoured Mr. Jamnadas

Mehta and Mr. Aftab Ali, the president and vice-president of that Indian Labour Federation by nominating them for the ILO session held at Philadelphia in May 1944 although these people were almost nowhere in the Indian labour movement which they were supposed to represent in the said ILO session. The AITUC strongly objected to this farcical nomination, but the government did not pay any heed to it. The Government of India advanced a curious plea that as because there had been no mechanism to find out which of these two organizations was of more representative character, both the organizations should alternately participate in the ILO sessions, although the first chance would go to the IFL.

Meanwhile the serious reaction that had started brewing among the workers in consequence of receiving financial help from the government by the IFL, led Mr. Aftab Ali, who was also the president of the Seamen's Union, to resign from the office of vice-president of IFL in November 1944. While resigning he called upon other unions also to follow suit. On the other side, as a reward of sincere service and loyalty to the government, Mr. Jamnadas Mehta was appointed as the Government of India's Agent General in Burma in the same month of 1944. This made the existence of IFL extremely precarious and in no time it got wiped out from the trade union map of India.

Ultimately at the close of the World War II it was the All India Trade Union Congress which stood as the only rallying point of the Indian working class with an organized strength of 700,000 members.

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LAST PHASE OF NATIONAL STRUGGLE AND THE INDIAN WORKING-CLASS 1945-47

Countrywide Upsurge :

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

The upsurge of the world democratic and national liberation forces that followed the defeat of fascism rocked India too and an unprecedented and irresistible struggle for national liberation and democratic advance engulfed the entire country. The raising of the Indian National Army by Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose and its capture and trial before military tribunal by the British Government after the defeat of the Axis powers intensely moved and at the same time deeply wounded the national feelings of the Indian patriotic masses.

With the end of the war, new proposals were announced by the British Government to introduce further constitutional changes in India within the framework of the Government of India Act 1935. All the members of the Congress Working Committee were released and a conference of representative political leaders were called at Simla on 25 June 1945.

But the failure of the Simla Conference because of the unsatisfactory, provocative and divisive proposals put forward by the Viceroy Lord Wavell combined with Congress-Muslim League disunity and the communal demand of the latter produced a political impasse in India.

But when the British Government was busy in simultaneously playing divisive tactics and taking advantage of the dis-

unity and vacillations of the upper level leadership, the masses at the bottom burst forth in an unprecedented upsurge. Of particular significance was the fact that aided and abetted by the unscrupulous imperialists, when the obscurantist forces were threatening to divide the Indian people by preaching the venomous gospel of communalism, the toiling masses in millions—the Hindus, the Muslims and the so-called untouchables rallied together and put up a grand and united action against imperialism. Defying death and indiscriminate firing by the police and the troops and carrying Congress and Muslim League flags and also 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 Court Martial and conviction of the INA officers deeply incensed the Indian people irrespective of the Hindus and the Muslims and the united protest actions that followed ultimately succeeded in forcing the British Government to set them free.

Tempestuous mass struggles that had been sweeping the country and the image of the Indian National Army stirred and roused the patriotic feelings of the Indian Armed Forces too. In the course of India's freedom movement, this was an entirely new development laden with tremendous revolutionary significance.

The ratings of the Royal Indian Navy, who were highly aggrieved in consequence of a long series of unremedied grievances, rose in open revolt against the British regime. It was first sparked off at the Bombay Naval base on 18 February 1946. From the beginning, the leaders of the revolt had made contact with the Congress and Muslim League leaders but received no response from them. But when Admiral Godfrey threatened to crush the revolt by using overwhelming forces at the disposal of the government, the Central Naval Strike Committee which was set up by the rebellious ratings, instead of bowing down, appealed to the civilian masses for organizing peaceful strike and *hartal* in reply to that audacious threat. When this extremely critical situation demanded an unstinted help and support from the forces of the national movement to defeat the imperialist threat and save the patriotic struggle of the naval ratings, Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel on behalf of Con-

gress refused to support the strike and *hartal* and opposed it. But the call of the Central Naval Strike Committee received sincere support from the Communist Party and the trade unions of Bombay. On February 22, the working class and other sections of the toiling masses of Bombay universally participated in this strike and *hartal* facing indiscriminate police and military firing. In the resistance struggle that raged on for three days from February 21 to February 23, according to conservative official figures, 250 patriots sacrificed their precious lives at the brutal hands of the British *gendarmes*. In Calcutta, Madras, Karachi and other places too popular demonstrations were held in support of the naval ratings' struggle. This episode marked a glorious instance of sharp political consciousness of the working class and other toiling masses and their intense feelings for attainment of national freedom even if that meant sacrificing their lives in hundreds.

The events of mass-uprising of the period 1945-46 clearly revealed the new alignment of class forces in the political map of India. Defying communal conspiracies, the unity and cohesion of the entire working class and their inspired participation in the political mass struggles and the uncompromising resoluteness demonstrated by the peasantry, the students and the middle-class elements raised the tempo of the anti-imperialist struggle to a challenging height. The whole of the anti-imperialist fighting forces thus stood poised for exploding the very foundation of British colonialism in India. But right at this moment when the working class and the people started moving on the path of an unrelenting mass struggle and when sparks of revolt began firing the armed forces too, the Congress and the Muslim League came out in unconcealed condemnation of the strikes and revolutionary activities of the masses and the armed forces. Addressing the rebellious ratings of the Navy, the Congress President Mr. Abul Kalam Azad declared,¹ 'Strikes, *hartals* and defiance of temporary authority of the day are out of place.'

The contradiction between the advancing mass struggle and the reformist bourgeois leadership that repeatedly tended to come to the surface from the very beginning of the national movement, and the panick that frequently struck the leadership at the very sight of mass upsurge followed by hasty attempts to bridle it up again and again—all these contradictions deve-

loped acutely at this momentous hour of India's struggle for freedom and created a yawning gap between the leadership and the masses.

The British Government did not fail to grasp this inherent weakness of the national movement. The diplomatic activities that followed the resignation of Mr. Churchill, the war-time Prime Minister of Britain and assumption of office by the new Prime Minister Mr. Clement Atlee till the partition of India culminating in the transfer of power to the capitalist-landlord classes of both parts of the sub-continent bore ample testimony to with what shrewdness and divisive tactics the British Government tried to make use of this weakness.

Economic Struggles of the Working Class :

Side by side with the countrywide mass political upsurge that followed the war, the working class of India had to engage itself in sharp economic struggles. The number of industrial workers during the war increased by a little more than fifty per cent over that of the pre-war period. While in 1939 the total number of workers employed in different industries stood at 1,751,137, the same for the year 1945 rose to 2,642,977 indicating an increase of 50.9 per cent. The main two problems that faced the working class after the war were large-scale retrenchment of the war-time recruits and reduction of wages.

The cost of living bonus that the workers secured during the war did not at all suffice to compensate the rise in prices. The ILO report too confirmed this fact. Yet after the war, the bonus was reduced although the working-class cost of living indices in different industrial centres after a little fall in October-November 1944 tended to rise again. In Bombay the cost of living index in January 1945 was 218 but in November of that year it rose to 230. Between the same periods the corresponding figures were 282 and 290 for Ahmedabad, 301 and 317 for Kanpur and 217 and 230 for Madras.²

According to the estimate published by *The Times*, London, from 5 to 7 million men in India engaged in different trades, professions and secondary employment right from industrial workers to government employees and armymen, were thrown out of employment after the end of the war.³

The working class had to resolutely encounter this ex-

tremely dangerous situation. The phenomenal rise in the number of strike-actions in the year 1946 was an indication of the stiff resistance put up by the working class. In 1946 there occurred as many as 1,629 strikes involving 1,961,948 workers with a loss of 12,717,762 working days while the corresponding figures for 1945 were 820 strikes, 747,530 participants and 4,054,499 working days lost.

In this situation in order to safeguard the workers' interest the AITUC raised the demands of stopping retrenchment, merging dearness allowance in basic pay, minimum wage, eight-hour day, health insurance scheme, old age pension, unemployment allowance and several other social security schemes.

The workers of different industrial centres in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Punjab, the United Provinces, Bombay, Madras etc. embarked on a series of strike struggles. To suppress these militant working-class actions the government took recourse to wanton police firing and severe other repressive measures and many workers had to lay down their lives while undauntedly upholding their cause. These gallant strike actions which in reality metamorphosed into anti-imperialist struggles of the working class inspired the masses to a large measure.

The most outstanding struggle of this phase was the indefinite strike of the workers and employees of the Posts and Telegraphs Department of the Government of India—which began in July 1946.

The post-war economic condition spelt disaster in the lives of all sections of the working masses and the employees in the government departments were no exception. The struggle of the Posts and Telegraphs Department employees and workers was a part of the determined resistance put up by the working class against the disasters. The scanty wage-structure and a similarly unsatisfactory condition of service caused deep discontent among the employees of this department. But disharmonious outlook of the different trade unions of those employees, upper level docility of most of the unions and to top it all, total lack of any organizational unity stood as a serious obstacle in the way of building up a countrywide united action. Yet the pressure of accumulated problems ultimately impelled the employees of the Posts and Telegraphs Department to the path of a strike-struggle overcoming all impedi-

ments.

Led by Mr. V. G. Dalvi, the Postman Lower Grade Staff Union served strike notice on the government with effect from 11 July 1946 demanding implementation of a 16 point charter of demands which included among others revision of pay scales. On receiving the notice, the Director General of Posts and Telegraphs declared that as because the disputes had been referred to arbitration, the strike would be unlawful and any employee found participating in the illegal strike would be severely dealt with. Mr. Chaman Lall had already formed a Federation of several unions of the Posts and Telegraphs employees under his own presidency, although the Postman Lower Grade Staff Union was not affiliated to that Federation. In tune with the government, Mr. Chaman Lall on behalf of that Federation expressed opposition to the strike.

But ignoring official threats and opposition of Mr. Chaman Lall's Federation, the strike called by Postman Lower Grade Staff Union actually commenced on July 11, as scheduled. Simultaneously, All India Telegraph Union too called upon the telegraphists to join in a countrywide strike. The Postal, R.M.S., and P.M.G. Office staff of Bengal and Assam also declared to join the strike under the banner of their respective unions. But Dr. Norona, general secretary of the Indian Telegraph Association opposed the strike as a sequel to which, the members of that Association in Bengal *en masse* joined the All India Telegraph Union and took part in the strike. The Posts and Telegraph employees of Bengal and Assam also joined the strike since July 21. In consequence, the strike which was started by the lower grade staff since July 11, by then engulfed the entire Post and Telegraph Department and spread out to whole of the country. The strike was particularly successful in Bengal, Assam, Bombay, Madras, Delhi, Rajputana, the Central Provinces, Berar, Sindh and Baluchistan.

This strike of the Post and Telegraph Department began at a moment of turbulent mass-political action of the Indian people against imperialism. The strike of the employees also was a mighty protest against the hardened anti-labour attitude of the British administration. The intensely heightened anti-imperialist sentiment of the Indian people therefore justifiably welcomed this strike. The working class and the fighting masses

considered this struggle as an inseparable part of the people's anti-imperialist upheaval and their active support truly elevated this economic strike to a level of anti-imperialist national struggle.

All India Trade Union Congress declared support to this strike. The working class of the country came out actively to lead the strike to a victory and sympathetic general strikes were observed in Bengal, Assam, Bombay and Madras. A leader and direct participant of that struggle, Mr. K. G. Bose writes,⁴ 'At the call of Bombay Provincial Trade Union Congress the working class of Bombay observed a day's strike on July 22 in support of the struggle of the Posts and Telegraphs Department employees. Similarly, at the call of Madras Provincial Trade Union Congress the working class of Madras observed a token strike on July 23. On July 29, general strike and *hartal* were observed in Bengal at the call of Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress. In Assam too general strike was observed on July 29. The city of Calcutta came to a dead halt on July 29. In the afternoon streams of the city's populace as if broke on the central rally at Monument Maidan. Such a big workers' rally was never held before. Large processions converged at the Maidan on the eve of the meeting. Enthusiastic people lined up the streets, many soldiers were also present.'

Mr. Mrinal Kanti Bose, president of the Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress presided over this meeting at Calcutta and Messrs. Bankim Mukherjee, Abdul Momin, Sibnath Banerjee and Dr. Moitreyi Bose and other leaders of the left-wing political parties and trade union organizations spoke in support of the strike.

Besides the left-wing political parties and the trade unions, different student and mass organizations also came forward with active support for the strike. A resolution was also passed in the Bengal Legislative Assembly urging the Government of India for settlement of the strike. All sections of the toiling masses of the country stood in support of the strike, but 'the Indian National Congress did not officially express any public support for this struggle. Pressurized by the masses, Mr. Gopinath Bordoli, Chief Minister of Assam sent telegrams to Jawaharlal Nehru and the Government of India requesting settlement of the strike and it was a fact that Jawaharlal Nehru made a

press statement on the issue of this struggle, but that statement though mentioned words of sympathy with the low-paid Post and Telegraph workers for their honesty and efficiency, did not contain any direct and clear words of support for this struggle besides proposing to refer the demands to arbitration for a satisfactory settlement. Rather, in a press statement issued on July 19 by Mr. Satyanarayan Sinha, the Chief Whip of the Congress Party in the Central Legislative Assembly, the strike was called 'unwise'. Moreover, when a section of the Post and Telegraph workers had decided to continue the strike for a longer period, on August 2, Messrs. Abul Kalam Azad, Sarat Chandra Bose and Surendra Mohan Ghosh issued an appeal to the workers stating that in the event of partial acceptance of the demands by the authorities it would be inadvisable to further continue the strike in consideration of public inconvenience.⁵

Despite official threats, direct opposition by Mr. Chaman Lall and his followers and the anti-strike attitude of the Congress leadership, this strike enjoying the active support of the AITUC, the working class and the fighting masses of the country brought to bear sufficient pressure on the government. 'The authorities expressed eagerness to find out a way of settlement through the mediation of the Chief Minister of Bombay Mr. B. G. Kher and Mr. Mangaldas Pakawasa. After a settlement of twelve demands with Mr. Dalvi, the strike of the Postman Lower Grade Staff Union was called off on August 3. The fighting leadership of Bengal refused to accept the settlement done in their absence. A special arrangement was made to bring this leadership to Delhi by air. On August 1, the government announced that beside settlement of those twelve demands, an amount of ten million rupees would be spent for granting 'Good Conduct Pay' to the Post and Telegraph Workers. Ultimately the strike in Bengal and Assam was withdrawn on August 6.'⁶

After observance of successful strike and *hartal* on July 29, in the mammoth rally that was held in Calcutta on that day, a historic resolution was passed in support of the strike. The concluding sentence of the resolution was highly significant. It said, 'This rally firmly believes that this historic general strike has marked the beginning of a new chapter of unity and fight-

ing consciousness in the labour movement of the country.' This firm belief came out to be exceptionally true. Taking lesson from this struggle, the Post and Telegraph workers decided to form one organization after merging all their separate unions. This experience further taught the Post and Telegraph workers that for a successful struggle it was necessary to unite with the entire working class of the country. This feeling led the All India Postal and R.M.S. Union and All India Lower Grade Staff Union to decide for getting affiliated with the All India Trade Union Congress. Accordingly the Calcutta session of AITUC held in 1947 took a decision granting affiliation to those two unions.

In the midst of this fighting upsurge of the working class and the wider masses, the twentysecond session of the AITUC was held on 13-19 February 1947 in Calcutta, a storm centre of militant struggle. The organizational strength of AITUC reflected a tremendous growth of trade union movement during this period. The session was attended by as large as 1,049 delegates.

The strength of the AITUC by then increased to 601 affiliated unions with a membership of 796,194.

On the demands of living wage, social security measure etc. the session called upon the working class to observe 'Basic Demand day' on 18 March 1947. But the most important resolution passed by the session was one reiterating the objective of AITUC of a Socialist State in which all powers would be in the hands of the producing class, industry would be nationalized, man would no longer be exploited by man and production would be organized for the needs of the people.

Birth of Indian National Trade Union Congress :

Accelerating mass upsurge and the increasingly conscious rôle of the working class in the political struggle of India reacted heavily on the Congress leadership and sharpened their anti-communist bias. Even Mr. Nehru who previously spoke in the AITUC session strongly in defence of the doctrine of class struggle, felt uneasy at the sight of its challenging advance and indulged in public declamation against the communists. The Congress-Socialist leadership too dartled a strong anti-communist and anti-Soviet tirade and openly clashed with the

communists.

In early 1946, Congress won electoral victories and formed provincial ministries except in the Punjab, Sind and Bengal. After getting into office the Congress ministries betrayed the same anti-labour attitude as they did during their holding office in 1937.

Instead of taking initiative in mitigating the acute problems of the workers, both the Congress and the non-Congress ministries opposed the struggles which the workers were forced to launch against retrenchment, for dearness allowance and solution of other problems. They counselled the workers against strike which according to them, would not help solving their problems rather would mount it up. But when the workers moved on the path of strikes ignoring their counsels, there was no wavering on the part of the ministries to unleash police atrocities in a bid to suppress those strikes.

The Industrial Relations Act, 1946 passed by the Congress ministry of Bombay also revealed an undemocratic and anti-labour attitude. This Act was designed to hamstring the struggles of the workers by more tighteningly fastening them to the machinery of arbitration. Simultaneously, the procedure which this Act laid down for recognition of the unions was also a manifestation of a crudely bureaucratic outlook. Instead of laying down the democratic principle of judging by secret ballot, the Act recognized the membership register as the criterion for determining the representative character of the unions. The Indian trade union movement had therefore to be loudly vocal against this undemocratic Act.

The entire chain of events tended to more and more bring to light a well thought-out attempt on the part of the Congress leadership to thwart and weaken the organized strength and impervious unity of the working class. The growing political consciousness of the working class actually frightened the bourgeois leadership of Congress and in a bid to make safe their own compromising and class collaborationist position, the task of winning over the backward section of the working class to their side assumed urgency.

This class politics prompted the Congress leadership to take a directly anti-communist stance and the Congress Working Committee which met at Calcutta on 7-11 December 1946

issued instructions to remove the communists from inside the Congress organization.

But meanwhile, the Communist Party had emerged as the third biggest political force in the Indian political scene coming next to Congress and Muslim League. In the elections to the Provincial Legislative Assemblies in 1946, the communists secured 112,736 worker votes as against 321,607 votes polled by the Congress.

In this situation any delay on the part of the Congress leadership would have amounted to incalculable harm to their class position and so they decided to form a separate labour organization strictly under their own political and ideological control.

Congress Majdoor Sevak Sangh accordingly convened a conference at Delhi on 3-4 May 1947 in order to implement that decision. The Congress leaders and activists working in trade unions attended that conference. 'Nearly all the Provincial Congress Committees had sent their representatives, mostly members of the Provincial Labour Sub-Committees in accordance with the invitations issued by the General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee.'⁷

Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel, president of the Hindusthan Majdoor Sevak Sangh presided over and Mr. J. B. Kripalani the then president of the National Congress inaugurated the conference. Prominent Congress trade unionists like Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee, Messrs. Gulzarilal Nanda, Khandubhai Desai, Abid Ali Jafarbhay, Hariharnath Shastri, Sibnath Banerjee, R. A. Khadilkar etc. took part in the proceedings of the conference. Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, Mr. Jagjivan Ram and several members of the provincial ministries were in attendance. Among other notables attending the conference were Mr. Shankarrao Deo, general secretary of All India Congress Committee and Congress-Socialist leaders like Dr. Ram Monohar Lohia, Mr. Ashok Mehta and Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali.⁸

Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee who formerly belonged to AITUC and its thrice president moved the main resolution in the conference which stated,⁹ 'Whereas the course which the labour movement in the country is taking under the leadership of those who are opposed to peaceful change and democratic methods has proved extremely detrimental to the growth of

strong and healthy trade unionism and is doing incalculable harm to the true interests of the masses of the country and whereas it has become now a sacred and imperative obligation of those who care for the well-being of the working class to take concerted action to safeguard and promote its interests, it is resolved that to give effect to this purpose an organization, called the Indian National Trade Union Congress be formed.'

Justifying formation of a separate organization and moreover that it should have been formed much earlier, Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel in his presidential address said, 'it was no use trying to reform the All India Trade Union Congress and capture it, because the communist unions put a bogus membership and do not hesitate to resort to unscrupulous methods. . . . The step which is being taken now should have been taken earlier.' Pointing out the urgency of bringing together all anti-communists, Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda, the then Labour Minister of Bombay said, 'the urgent need of the moment is, therefore, to provide machinery for co-ordinating the scattered forces of workers who are in fundamental opposition to the communists.'¹⁰

Why this hurried urgency pleaded by Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel and Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda for gathering the anti-communist forces? The Congress historian of Indian labour movement, Mr. P. P. Lakshman himself explains the background. He writes,¹¹ 'Another matter of deep concern to those who refused to enter the AITUC was that certain dominant groups within it waged a violent campaign against arbitration as a method of avoiding strikes and securing justice for the workers. It may be mentioned that the AITUC at its last annual session held at Calcutta *passed a resolution condemning the Bombay Industrial Relations Act and the Industrial Disputes Act* mainly on the ground that the enactments provide for adjudication and empower government to refer disputes to the arbitration of a Tribunal or the Industrial Court. *This resolution of the AITUC runs directly counter to the declared policy of the Congress in this connection as stated by the Congress Working Committee on 13th August 1946.*' Here to add that both these anti-labour and undemocratic Acts *viz.* Bombay Industrial Relations Act and Industrial Disputes Act were fathered by the Congress ministry of Bombay—one during their office in 1946 and the other in 1939. The AITUC passed resolutions against those

anti-labour Acts and that ran 'directly counter to the declared policy of the Congress in this connection.' Hence the urgency of forming a separate labour organization through which 'The declared policy of the Congress' of 'avoiding strikes' could be successfully worked out. The class interests of the bourgeoisie demanded rejection of both strikes and revolutionary working-class movement and hence the necessity of forming a parallel organisation.

However, the resolution moved by Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee was passed by an overwhelming majority. Indian National Trade Union Congress was thus founded as the Labour wing of Indian National Congress. The conference elected a provisional executive committee with Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee as president, Mr. Khandubhai Desai as secretary and 19 other members with powers to co-opt additional members. Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association founded by Gandhiji which so long kept aloof from the central trade union organizations now joined and functioned as the main plank of this newly founded Indian National Trade Union Congress.

Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel, Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda and others made a number of slanderous charges against the communists in order to strengthen their case for forming a parallel labour centre. Interestingly a very fitting reply to those charges came from such a veteran trade union leader who himself was a very noted reformist and politically who had nothing in common with the communists. He was Mr. N. M. Joshi, the then general secretary of AITUC who while repudiating the charges of Mr. Patel and others said, 'The newly formed organization is really an adjunct of the Indian National Congress and is in no sense a non-party or non-political labour organization as the AITUC is, and may not be able to represent the working class. Communists today have a majority in the AITUC but all decisions taken by the AITUC are the decisions of the AITUC as a whole. The remedy of the present difficulty lies in sympathetic and prompt redressal of grievances. Unfortunately, the bewildered Congress ministries think that the easy way to get out of difficulty lies in dividing the ranks of labour. They will live and learn but in the meanwhile the mischief has been done.'

Thus haloed with the prestige of Congress, backed by the power and resources of the central and provincial govern-

ments and with full co-operation and blessings of the employers, the INTUC appeared on the Indian labour scene as an ideological rival to the AITUC. With the inception of INTUC, the embodiment of class collaborationist ideology in contradistinction to the ideology of class struggle, a new chapter with far-reaching implications opened up in the history of Indian labour.

In the political scene fast changes were taking place. Though undesired by the Congress, the strikes, *hartals* and countrywide mass upsurge advanced irresistibly and the shrewd British Government did not fail to discern the portents of a grave danger underlying it. The imperialists found the ground slipping off their feet. Constrained under these circumstances, in March 1946 the British Government sent Cabinet Mission to India for working out the details for transfer of power. Prolonged discussions were held between the Cabinet Mission, Congress and Muslim League in consequence of which in September of that year an Interim Government was formed in India. Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru headed the ministry which was later joined by Muslim League also in the month of October. The British Prime Minister Mr. Clement Atlee then announced on 20 February 1947 that transfer of power would take place latest by June 1948.

Accordingly Lord Louis Mountbatten was sent to India as Viceroy to arrange for the transfer of power. Serious differences arose between the Congress and the Muslim League, but Mr. Mountbatten worked out a compromise plan which was accepted by both the parties. India was partitioned and became free on 15 August 1947. The British Government transferred power to the capitalist-landlord classes of the divided sub-continent—India and Pakistan.

The subsequent events constitute an entirely new chapter of the working-class movement of India. The struggle of the working class that began in the background of the struggle for India's national freedom got transformed into a struggle with a new objective in a basically changed political context. In India the imperialist government was replaced by a government of the Indian capitalist and landlord classes politically embodied in the National Congress. This fundamental political change effected also deep rooted changes in the Indian social context.

Before taking over power from the British, the Congress succeeded too in dividing the working class and forming their own labour wing. Yet, through decades of tortuous economic and political struggles, the working class of India as a whole—as independence was ushered in—stood as an organized and class-conscious social force poised for harder revolutionary performances.

The splendid rôle performed by the Indian working class in the anti-imperialist and national liberation movement of India, howsoever that might be slighted by the reactionary falsifiers of history, will ever be remembered as a glorious and illuminating chapter in the history of the struggle of the Indian masses for national freedom.

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TRADE UNIONS OF GOVERNMENT AND OTHER WHITE COLLAR EMPLOYEES

The Government is the largest employer of the country and overwhelming majority of the white collar employees in India are employed in the Central and State Government establishments.

The process of development of the trade union movement of the government employees are marked with significant differences with that of the industrial workers. The industrial workers founded their trade unions and established their trade union rights through ceaseless struggles against inhuman capitalist exploitation. But the growth of trade union movement of the government employees was from the very beginning faced with strangling impediments created by the colonial government which tried to smother it or at least to mutilate it at its very infancy. In a colonial administration the entire community of the government employees is made to function as arms and limbs not of an institution serving the people but of a machinery brutally exploiting, oppressing and acting against the people. Hence arises the necessity of isolating the government employees from the society at large, and to build them up as the task force of an anti-people and oppressive colonial administration.

Origin of Conduct Rules and Negation of Political Rights of the Government Employees :

Thus to shackle and make them subservient to the colonial regime the imperialist government framed in the year 1904 the Government Servants' Conduct Rules. Though these Rules appeared full blown in 1904, in embryonic form it lay in the womb of the very first days of colonial rule.

As soon as the rule of the East India Company was begun

to be established in India, various decrees were proclaimed to regulate the conduct of the employees of the Company. The East India Company Acts of 1770, 1793 and 1797, The Sale of Office Act 1809, The Government of India Act 1833, The Supreme Court Officers' Act 1859, The Indian Penal Code 1860, The Police Act 1861, The Administrator General's Act 1874 and similar other Acts that had been passed during those days added up to form the basis of the official orders for regulating the employees' conduct.¹

But the orders and instructions issued on the basis of these Acts did not put constraint on the employees in regard to their participation in political activities. The reason behind this was, of course, the total absence of political activities in India during that time. With the founding of Indian National Congress in 1885, the colonial government became, however, quite alert about the political activities of the government employees and it was the first time in 1890 that orders of the Governor-General in Council were issued in this regard. The circular containing the orders stated,² 'A Government servant may not take part in any political agitation or meeting, or attend any political meeting, his presence at which is likely to be misconstrued or to impair his public usefulness. When there is room for doubt whether any action which a Government servant proposes to take will contravene the provisions of this rule, he should refer the matter for orders to the Local Government to which, or the Government servant to whom, he is immediately subordinate.'

Subsequent to issuance of this circular imposing these restrictions on the political activities of the government employees, the Government of India thought it desirable to shape a compact set of rules reproducing the substance of the circulars and resolutions issued by the government at various times for regulating the conduct of the public servants in respect of borrowing money, receipt of complimentary addresses and other matters including participation in political activities. This compact set of rules issued in the year 1904 came under the very title of The Government Servants' Conduct Rules 1904.³

After framing of these rules by the Government of India, these were made applicable both in respect of the Central and Provincial Government employees.

Clause 20 of this Conduct Rules which provided the restric-

tions on the employees' political activities was, however, modified and given a more stringent form in 1905. This modified clause provided that, 'A Government servant may not take part in, or subscribe in aid of, any political movement in India or relating to Indian affairs. Nor may he attend any political meeting, his presence at which is likely to be misconstrued or to impair his public usefulness.'⁴

Since then these Conduct Rules have been modified times without number and given a more and more reactionary character prohibiting, among others, meeting in public places, procession and strike by the government employees. Even after the end of the colonial rule in 1947, these anti-democratic Rules have not been repealed, on the country these have been made more stringent by effecting in them a number of retrograde amendments thereby reducing the government employees to the status of second grade citizens divested of political and trade union rights.

The imperialist rulers thus framed rules stripping the government servants of all political rights and those rules continue to haunt the government employees even today. But in their own country—in Great Britain the condition is entirely different, where the government employees enjoy a fairly large measure of political and trade union rights.

In Britain the Committee on the Political Activities of Civil Servants under the chairmanship of Mr. J. C. Masterman, Provost of Worcester College, Oxford, considered the question of granting the freedom to exercise ordinary citizen right to as many employees of the State as possible. The Committee reported in 1949 and the recommendations in principle were accepted by the government. In 1953, the government issued a White Paper containing the report of a joint committee of the National Whitley Council and a statement of government policy thereon. The Government accepted a scheme under which about 62 per cent of the whole Civil Service are completely free from restrictions, about 22 per cent are free, subject to acceptance of the need for discretion, to take part in all activities except parliamentary candidature, and only 16 per cent remain debarred from national political activities. But as many as possible of this last group who wish are given permission to take part in local government and political activities in the

local field.⁵

According to above classification, in the non-industrial Civil Service, the completely free groups are the minor grades such as messenger etc. The intermediate group mainly includes clerical and typing grades and the need for permission depends, broadly, on the type of departmental work they are doing. The last group which is not allowed to take part in national political activities includes the executive, the professional, scientific and technical and administrative grades.

Any member of the group which is completely free of restrictions who intends standing for Parliament must resign his appointment before nomination day. If he is not elected to Parliament he will, on application within a week of declaration day, be reinstated in his previous capacity. If he is elected he will be entitled to return to his post provided that: (a) he ceases to be a Member after an absence not exceeding five years; (b) he had not less than 10 years' actual service before his election; and (c) he applies for reinstatement within three months of ceasing to be a Member.⁶

Besides these political rights, every civil servant in Britain may engage in such private activities as he wishes, provided that do not in any way conflict with his official duties.⁷

Though circumscribed in varying degrees, the British Civil servants enjoy a large measure of political rights, whereas in India the British Government followed a directly opposite policy out of pure colonial interests of using the government employees as a cog in the wheel of an exploiting and oppressive machinery. Unfortunately the same policy of complete negation of political rights of the government employees continue even today no less stridently.

Principles of Recognition of the Government Employees' Association—Its Origin :

The principles of granting official recognition to the government employees' associations and unions were first enunciated on 13 October 1921.⁸

The question of granting recognition to the government employees' associations and unions in India came up for consideration of the British Government in the background of the principle laid down for recognition of the government em-

ployees' associations in Great Britain.

The Union of the Postal employees of Britain is the first officially recognized union of the civil servants in that country. This union was granted recognition in 1899. When a representation on behalf of that association was submitted for consideration to the Duke of Norfolk, the Duke wanted the representation to be made through usual official channels and by officers directly concerned.⁹ The historical origin of the official principle necessitating submission of representation through proper channel lay in this incident. Successive Post-Master Generals in Britain then extended recognition to various unions and the matter made further progress when the government consented to the establishment of an independent Arbitration for determining the terms of employment in the Civil Service for all grades and sections with salaries under £500 a year. Before this tribunal the representative of any association could appear together with representatives of the Treasury. Finally in 1919, an elaborate series of joint councils for particular branches of establishment for whole departments, and for whole grades of the service throughout all departments was established. In these councils equal numbers of persons nominated by the employees' associations and superior officers chosen by the government met periodically to discuss on equal terms questions of office organization, professional training, condition of service, method of promotion etc.¹⁰

The principles that the British government then followed in deciding whether recognition should be granted were: firstly, generally not less than one-third of the class claimed to be represented by the Association should be members of that Association; secondly, so far as practicable each association should represent only a single class, and thirdly, the central body of the associations would be eligible for submitting memoranda on general questions relating to the conditions of work, wages, hours of duty, leave, meals, relief etc. of the class or classes of the employees represented by the association.¹¹

The question of giving official recognition to the government employees' association in India first came up for consideration of the Government of India after formation of the Indian Telegraph Association in 1906. But the matter did not make progress until the year 1919, when in connection with considera-

tion of the question of recognition of the Foreman's Association of India, the following principles were broadly laid down by the Government of India as preconditions for giving such recognition: ¹²

- (1) The association should represent distinct class of government employees,
- (2) The association should not employ any paid officer who was not in active service of the government,
- (3) The association should be allowed to represent the interest of the class but not of an individual.

Among the government employees' associations of India, Foreman's Association of India, an organization of the Foremen in the Ordinance factories of India, was the first to get official recognition. The headquarters of that association was situated at Dum Dum in the vicinity of Calcutta.

Meanwhile, the Versailles Peace Treaty that was entered into at the end of the World War I provided formation of International Labour Organization as a part of the League of Nations in recognition of the growing labour movement of the World. Articles 427 of that Peace Treaty which the High Contracting Parties regarded 'as of special and urgent importance' recognized 'The right of association for all lawful purposes by the employed as well as by the employers.'

Subsequent to the signing of that Treaty and thereby recognizing the right of association of the employed and India becoming a party to the Labour Section of the Treaties of Peace, the question of recognition of the government employees' organizations became irresistible and came very much to the forefront. The terms of this Treaty facilitated the men in private employ, and in this situation it appeared to the Government of India that this facility should be extended to the associations of the government employees too since 'large number of these associations of government employees have already been established.'¹³ So on 13 October 1921 the Government of India issued an order wherein it was stated,¹⁴ 'In view of the assertion of this principle, the government of India consider that no obstacle could now be placed in the way of the Association of employees of private employers, and therefore, they further considered that it was essential that they should indicate the principles upon which they themselves were prepared to accord recognition to

association of their employees.' Accordingly the Government of India after incorporating the principles already noted, framed a complete set of rules for recognition of the government employees' associations in India and authorised the provincial governments 'to make such subsidiary rules as may be required to meet the circumstances of particular classes of employment.'¹⁵

The system of giving recognition to the government employees' associations came in vogue after issuance of this order of the Government of India.

Rights of Negotiation :

While in Great Britain 'every civil servant is encouraged to belong to the staff association or trade union appropriate to his grade and the nature of his work',¹⁶ the situation in India is quite different, if not just the opposite. In India formation of union among the government employees was frowned upon by the British Government and the same disliking, if not direct opposition from the side of the authorities continue even today.

In Britain, 'An association secures the right to negotiate on behalf of its members through an act of recognition by the Civil Service Department or by the department concerned. *National recognition carries with it the right to take part in discussions, negotiations, agreements and arbitration* affecting staff in grades or groups common to more than one department. . . . Recognition also entitles an association or union to holding meeting in official premises and gives certain privileges to their officials, such as access to official premises, the granting of special leave for association purpose, and collection of staff association subscription.'¹⁷ Further 'All Civil Service Staff Associations are free to affiliate to the Trade Union Congress'.¹⁸

The situation in India in this respect greatly varied already during imperialist rule and in a large measure the variation continues even today. In India although the recognized associations are eligible to take part in discussions etc. with the authorities concerned, but that depends almost entirely upon the fancy and sweet will of those authorities. The right to negotiation is recognized in India in an absolutely formal way without, however, any practical obligation on the part of the government. Further, as trade union rights in the sense enjoyed by the industrial workers are not allowed to the government

employees in India, the staff associations too are not free to affiliate to any national trade union centre.

In Britain, 'There are two methods of joint consultation and negotiation in the non-industrial Civil Service: the Whitley Council method and the method outside Whitley Councils, of direct relations between staff associations and Government departments.'¹⁹

The name Whitley is that of a former speaker of the House of Commons who, in 1917-18, was chairman of a reconstruction committee which proposed a system of industrial councils, representative of both employers and employed. Accordingly in Britain, the Civil Service National Whitley Council was set up in 1919, and departmental Whitley Councils have been set up in practically all departments at varying times. The National Whitley Council deals with methods of general interest to the service. The National Council has 54 members including 4 secretaries: one-half, known as the Official Side, normally appointed by the government from among heads of departments and other senior officers and the other half known as the Staff Side, appointed by various staff associations.

If there is failure to secure agreement by negotiation on proposals or claims affecting pay and similar matters, submission to arbitration is open to either side within the limitation set up by the National Whitley Council Agreement. The Civil Service Arbitration Tribunal is a special body established to settle such disagreements. This tribunal has an independent chairman and two members, one drawn from a panel appointed by the Minister of Labour as representing the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the other from a similar panel representing the Staff side of the National Whitley Council.

This machinery for negotiation supplements, and not replace, the facilities provided to employees to make individual representation, or to a trade union of employees.

Curiously, though this machinery for negotiation was introduced in Great Britain as far back as in 1919, the British Government during the long course of its colonial rule did not even think of introducing any such system in regard to the Civil service in India. The Government instead resorted to a policy of suppression or at least crippling the unionism of the government employees. In independent India, too, it was only

after a period of long 19 years interspersed with various agitational activities including one countrywide strike of the employees in 1960 that the Government of India was ultimately constrained to introduce in October 1966 a machinery for negotiation known as the Joint Consultative Machinery for the Central government employees in India on the pattern of Whitley Machinery in Britain. The scheme for joint Consultative Machinery introduced in India is composed of a Joint Council at the National level and usually at two lower levels—department and regional office. The National Council deals with matters affecting central government employees generally, such as minimum remuneration, dearness allowance and pay of certain common categories and other service matters of common interest. The National Council is composed of an Official Side consisting of 25 members appointed by the government from amongst its senior officers and the Staff Side consisting of up to 60 members nominated by the recognized associations.

Though this scheme was introduced for about two million central government employees, the bulk of the government employees of the country *viz.* the State government employees numbering about four million were not covered by any such scheme. Only recently in a few of the States the governments have introduced a machinery like this and that too in a purely perfunctory manner without any mentionable benefit for the employees concerned.

Besides, unlike Great Britain or many other western capitalist countries, the government employees in India are constitutionally debarred from the right to strike. Thus although the growing might of the government employees' organizations in India gave rise to a number of strikes of these employees in the last two decades, yet these 'illegal' strikes had entailed immense sufferings for the employees in the form of both police atrocities and large-scale victimization.

Growth of Government Employees' Associations and Unions :

Government employees' associations began to be formed in the very first decade of the twentieth century. The Indian Telegraph Association formed in 1906 may be said to be the

first association of this category. This association continued to exist for a long time.

The Postal employees of the country were faced with numerous problems in regard to their condition of service at the beginning of this century. The employees had to work in an indescribably oppressive atmosphere. Their abnormally low salaries and other adverse conditions of service deeply aggrieved them. Mr. Tarapada Mukherjee, a Postal employee, whose name would go down in history as the great initiator of Postal employees' trade union movement, began his efforts for organizing the Postal employees of Bengal at this moment. But in spite of heaped up discontents, in the prevailing circumstances of fear psychosis among the employees it was very difficult at that stage to organize them into an association. So instead of directly trying for forming an association, as a step towards it, he arranged a meeting of the Postal employees of Calcutta in March 1908 and formed a Postal Club.²⁰ In the city of Bombay too, a Postal Club was formed during the same period. These two Postal Clubs played a very remarkable rôle in the formation of the Postal and R.M.S. Employees' Union in the later period.

These preliminary efforts for forming unions notwithstanding, like the industrial workers among the government employees too, the really effective inspiration for getting organized into unions began to be felt only in the period following the World War I. The post-war economic crisis and the October Socialist Revolution impelled and inspired the government employees to form combinations with a view to resisting the deteriorating economic conditions. Being terribly hard-hit by the after-effects of the war, the employees began to realize the folly of standing aloof and soon grew up a number of organizations of the government employees. The first issue of *Labour*, the monthly journal of Provincial Postal and R.M.S. Association, Bengal and Assam circle published in February 1921, nicely summed up the situation. It stated,²¹ 'In India, as in other parts of the present day world, Labour is asserting itself. The voiceless millions of her workers are becoming increasingly alive to an understanding of their rights and privileges and articulating their demand in clear and unambiguous terms. Almost each dawn is heralding forth, through the newspapers, the birth of

new labour and trade unions, in some part or other of this vast continent.'

In this background was formed the Postal and R.M.S. Employees' Union and Mr. Tarapada Mukherjee played a remarkable role in its foundation. The post-war situation created a favourable background for formation of government employees' union. The biographer of Mr. Tarapada Mukherjee writes,²² "During the period 1914 to 1918 due to great European War, Post Office employees suffered much due to abnormal rise of food staff and other necessities of life. Although the employees prayed to Government to increase their pay, the Government turned a deaf ear to their prayer but only granted some war allowance. This allowance could not remove their hardship. They therefore gradually came to understand that a strong organization was necessary to help them to gain their objective. Therefore many officials joined the union and became members.'

Ultimately in a conference held at Indian Association Hall at Calcutta on 19-21 September 1920 the Provincial Postal and R.M.S. Association, Bengal and Assam Circle was formed. Mr. H. Barton, the general secretary of the Indian Telegraph Association presided over this conference.²³

This provincial conference was immediately followed by an All India Conference of Postal and R.M.S. employees at Delhi on 24-26 September 1920. Mr. Tarapada Mukherjee joined that conference after conclusion of the provincial conference at Calcutta and took active part in its proceedings.

This conference culminated in forming the All India Post Office and R.M.S. Union (including Burma). Mr. G. S. Khaparde was elected president and Mr. K. Santanam and Pandit Monmohan Lall Topa were elected joint secretaries of the organization.²⁴ The headquarters of this organization was fixed at Delhi. In 1924 this organization had a membership of 70,000.

The Postal employees played a pioneering rôle in imbuing the government employees with a sense of unionism in the post-World War I period. *Labour* was perfectly right when it wrote,²⁵ 'When, however, the history of the movement will have been written, the Indian Postal and R.M.S. Employees may justly claim a niche in one of its corner as having been the pioneers in the organization of the clerical section. . . .'

Within a few years, however, split occurred in this all-India union of all categories of staff. The lower grade employees did not feel their interests being safeguarded by remaining within this union. So in 1929 another union, the All India Postman and Lower Grade Staff Union was born. Similarly, the staff of the administrative offices who aspired for higher salaries and better privileges formed a union—The All India Administrative Offices Union. Subsequently many other divisions occurred and new unions were formed.

In later period, in 1929-30 during the world economic crisis, a large number of Postal employees were retrenched from service and the salaries of those appointed after 1931 were reduced. But thanks to the prevailing disunity in the leadership and in the ranks, the employees failed to stand united against that attack. After the end of the World War II when the abnormal rise in prices substantially reduced the standard of living of the employees and actually made their lives unbearable, the employees felt an urge for unity and in 1945 different unions of Postal employees federated themselves and formed the Federation of Postal and Telegraph union under the leadership of Mr. Chaman Lall.

During this time, the government appointed Mr. Justice Rajadhyaksha as Adjudicator to examine the grievances of the employees and to recommend accordingly. But the employees' Unions could not accept the recommendations of the Adjudicator made for those employees who were appointed after 1931. These employees wanted revision of pay-scales but the government circumvented this demand by announcing the formation of a Central Pay Commission for revision of pay-scale of all central government employees. This Commission was appointed on 10 May 1946 under the chairmanship of Mr. Justice Srinivas Varadachariar and this was the first Pay Commission for the Central Government employees in India.

This attitude of the government highly aggrieved the employees resulting in the strike of the employees from 11 July 1946 at the call of the All India Postman and Lower Grade Staff Association which was ultimately transformed into an all-India strike of all Postal employees. Details of this strike had already been discussed in the foregoing chapter.

The experiences of this strike led to the combination of the

All India Postal and R.M.S. Union, All India Telegraph Association and Indian Posts and Telegraphs Union and thereby formation of a united organization, the Union of Post and Telegraphs Workers. Birth of this union reduced the representative character of the Federation of Postal and Telegraph Union formed by Mr. Chaman Lall in 1945 which went against the strike in 1946. Yet the government continued to recognize this federation. Many other smaller unions of the Postal employees also came into existence during this time. But ultimately the entire pattern of union formation among the Postal employees underwent a change and categorywise, a new set of nine all-India Unions were formed and in 1954 these nine unions federated into National Federation of Post and Telegraph Employees. This federation and its affiliated nine unions were recognized by the government.

But meanwhile many other unions also grew up covering the employees working in the Central Secretariat, Audit, Income Tax and other departments of the Government of India. Several of these unions are quite old and were formed between 1913 and 1920. In the post-independence period these departmental unions combined into a somewhat loose federation *viz.* Confederation of the Central Government Employees' and Workers' Associations and Unions. The Unions of the railwaymen and the employees and workers in Defence department, however, remained aloof from this confederation.

Railways were introduced in India under private management. In some occasions although certain railways were constructed with government investment, their management was later vested in private companies. In 1942 the government took over the management of the entire railway system of India and since then all railwaymen are considered as government employees.

But formation of unions among the railway workers began already in the period of the railways' private ownership. In consequence, the restrictions which circumscribed the government employees' unions were not fully applicable in the case of the unions of the railway workers. They enjoyed trade union rights at par with the other industrial workers. After taking over of the management too, the government could not, however, fully divest the railway workers of their previously earned

rights and privileges.

The early efforts at combination of the railway workers were based on the individual railways. It was only after the World War I that an attempt was made to form a federation of the separate unions of the railway workers and the All India Railwaymen's Conference with this end in view was held at Bombay in 1921. That conference discussed the proposal for forming a federation and a draft constitution was also prepared for the purpose. Similar another conference was also held in the following year under the presidency of Rev. C. F. Andrews, but that conference too did not succeed in giving shape to the contemplated federation.

Subsequently, the delegates from the railway unions attending the fourth session of the AITUC held at Calcutta in 1924 formed a committee with Mr. N. M. Joshi and Mr. V. R. Kalappa as president and secretary respectively for taking effective steps in that direction. The attempts made by this committee came to fruition during the fifth session of the AITUC held at Bombay in February 1925 when a central organization of the railwaymen's union *viz.*, the All India Railwaymen's Federation was ultimately born. Raishahib Chandrika Prasad was elected president of this federation and Mr. N. M. Joshi and Mr. V. V. Giri were elected vice-presidents. Mr. Mukundalal Sarkar was elected general secretary of this federation. In 1930 the Railway Board granted official recognition to this federation.

The post-World War I developments led the Reserve Bank employees too towards forming unions and their unions took concrete shape during 1922-24. The organizations came into existence in the name of Currency Associations in the circles like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. But the employees in these different Currency Associations soon felt the necessity of combining together into an all-India centre. The attempts at forming this all-India organization started right from 1924 and in 1925 an all-India organization actually came into shape in a conference held in Calcutta. This organization now known as All India Reserve Bank Employees' Association has lately occupied a prominent place in the trade union movement of India.

Under the impact of the war the provincial government employees also felt inclined towards forming unions. The association of the provincial government employees in different

provinces began to be formed during 1920-21.

In Bengal too the provincial government employees formed associations during this period and the first association of this kind was the All Bengal Ministerial Officers' Association formed in February 1920. This association came into existence with the declared object of endeavouring for the improvement of salary structure, promotion prospects and status of the ministerial staff attached to the Collectorates, District Judge Courts, Revenue and other district offices under the Government of Bengal. The association also declared to remain completely free from politics and political discussions.²⁶

This All Bengal Ministerial Officers' Association though had come into being in February 1920, received official recognition from the Bengal Government only in November 1923.²⁷

Besides this association, other two associations of the Bengal Government employees were also formed during that period. The employees of the Secretariat and Directorate offices of the Writers' Buildings jointly formed the Writers' Buildings Association on 4 June 1920.²⁸

Subsequently another new association known as Bengal Secretariat Association consisting exclusively of the employees of the Secretariat was formed on 10 March 1924.²⁹

Lately the Writers' Buildings Association went out of existence, the Bengal Secretariat Association underwent transformation, but the All Bengal Ministerial Officers' Association continued to exist and is continuing even today. Besides these associations, many other associations of the Bengal Government were formed in the subsequent periods.

Although these associations declared to remain free from politics, they were not totally unconnected with the leaders of the national movement. For instance, the annual session of the All Bengal Ministerial Officers' Association held in 1925 was presided over by Mr. Bipin Chandra Pal, an eminent national leader of that period. In the same year a deputation led by Mr. Bipin Chandra Pal on behalf of that association met the Member, Revenue and Finance of the Government of Bengal and discussed the problems of the employees.

Likewise in other provinces of the country, organizations of the provincial employees grew up. But these associations did not yet assume the character of trade unions in the full sense

of the term and that higher type of consciousness was also lacking among the employees. The activities of these associations remained confined within the four walls of negotiation, submission of memorials and holding annual sessions.

Initially these associations of the provincial government employees were formed categorywise and functioned in an isolated manner, but in the post-independence era, particularly under the impact of deep economic crisis at the end of the first Five Year Plan, a tendency arose among these employees' associations to federate together. The Central (now State) Co-ordination Committee of the West Bengal Government Employees' Associations and Unions is a case in point which came into existence just at that period in the year 1956. Similar federative bodies were formed in other States too during the same period.

But the first attempt at forming an all-India organization of the employees of the State Governments was made through an all-India conference held at Hyderabad on 23-24 January 1960. That conference gave birth to the All India State Government Employees' Federation which consisted of different State-level organizations of the employees. But that organization in fact remained in a dormant state for the subsequent few years, which actually came to full life successively through an all-India convention held in Calcutta on 11-13 June 1965 and the first all-India conference held at Trivandrum on 2-5 November 1966. Mr. Arabinda Ghosh and Mr. A. Sreeramulu were elected president and general secretary respectively of that federation in that first conference at Trivandrum.

Attempts at forming all-India organization in the private sector in the Bank, Insurance and other industries were too observed in the post-independence period only. The All India Insurance Employees' Association was formed in the first-all-India convention of the Insurance employees held at Bombay on 30 June and 1 July 1950. Mr. Rajani Patel was elected president of that organization. The convention put forth the demand of nationalization of the Insurance industry.

All India Bank Employees' Association too was formed during that period although the associations of the Bank employees started coming into being already before 1925. Three unions of the employees of the Allahabad Bank and the Impe-

rial Bank were formed in Bombay and Calcutta circles prior to 1925. Presently the entire Life Insurance industry and the major part of Bank industry have, however, been nationalized.

Organizations of the teachers employed in the private schools too developed in the period following the World War I. All Bengal Teachers' Association was formed in Bengal on 27 March 1921.³⁰ Similar organizations were formed in other provinces too in the same period. An organization known as All India Federation of Teachers was also formed around 1928. During 1928 the Education Workers' International of Paris tried to contact this All India Federation of Teachers but the British Government took all precautionary measures to foil that attempt.³¹

The Government employees' Associations were not affiliated to the AITUC, they are not also permitted to do so under the existing government regulations. The railway workers' union under the private management were however affiliated to the AITUC. In addition to official restrictions, a tendency of aloofness also was to some extent responsible for development of these white collar organizations on a different footing outside the organizational fold of any central trade union. But the situation has fast changed and the recent period witnessed a number of countrywide united movement of the industrial workers belonging to central trade unions and the white collar employees organized into separate associations and federations. The trade union and political consciousness of the white collar employees of India whether in government or in private sectors have now reached quite a high degree of development.

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WORKING CLASS IN THE NEW PERSPECTIVE 1947 ONWARDS

Basic Change in Political Context :

The transfer of power on 15 August 1947 basically changed the political context in India. Till independence the sharp edge of the political as well as the economic struggles was directed against the imperialist subjugators. Workers' economic struggles confronted both the capitalists and the imperialists. Politically it was a broad united front against imperialism where right from the national bourgeoisie down to the working class, all rallied with varying degrees of revolutionary consistency with one common object. Of course, it was the working class which had the most consistently revolutionary role in this anti-imperialist struggle. Yet other economic classes were there although those in the upper stratum vacillated time to time, compromised and even on certain occasions were arrayed against the working class itself. But generally speaking, it was a united struggle for achievement of a common object—that was liberation of the country from foreign subjugation.

Independence ushered in a new political power held by the capitalist and landlord classes of India whose economic interests and therefore the political interests ran directly counter to those of the working class. It was now a rule of capital—a rule of the exploiting minority against the exploited majority. So, while in the pre-independence period, achievement of national liberation had been the immediate political objective of the working class, in the period after independence a harder and higher revolutionary objective was set before the working class—the objective of ending the rule of capital and establishing socialism in real sense of the term, a society free from the exploitation of man by man. Attainment of this objective is

preconditioned on the growing of the class consciousness of the working class into a socialist consciousness which the bulk of the Indian working class is yet to develop.

In the protracted struggle for attainment of this revolutionary objective, the general united front of the pre-independence era was no more a reality as a section of that united front itself had now been seated into the State-power against which the working class has to wage its struggle. In this changed correlation of forces the working class has to find its allies in other exploited strata of the people—principally the peasantry.

But of foremost importance in this struggle is the unity in the ranks in the working class itself. But just here the revolutionary working class has been put into an initial disadvantage. As has already been noted, immediately before coming to State-power in August 1947, National Congress succeeded in dividing the working class by creating INTUC, a rival national centre of the working class fully under the influence of bourgeois ideology and in full organizational control of Congress. So in the entirely changed political context and in a different correlation of forces of the post-independence era, the course of struggle of the working class is bound to be more tortuous and complicated.

This chapter is devoted only to a brief survey of these developments since independence.

Further Division in Trade Union Movement :

After independence different political parties appeared on the Indian political scene with better defined political lines and tried to more and more assert their political and organizational entities as distinct from others. The Indian trade union movement too, in the process, was subjected to further division and redivision, each section having gone under the ideological and organizational influence of the respective political parties—big or small.

In respect of trade union movement the Congress-Socialists had so long been functioning within the AITUC. But when they broke away from Congress in March 1948 and came to be known as Socialists, they also simultaneously left the AITUC and formed a separate organization, the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat. But soon this Hind Mazdoor Panchayat led by the socialists

and the Indian Federation of Labour led by the Royists met in a joint sitting at Calcutta on 24 December 1948 and amalgamated themselves giving birth to an entirely new organization, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha. Mr. Ashok Mehta, a prominent leader of the Socialist Party became the first general secretary of this new organization. While INTUC was created as an uncoined appendage of the National Congress and a vehicle for propagating the ideology of Congress and implementing the labour policies of the Congress Government, Hind Mazdoor Sabha was born as an organ for reaching the working class with the amorphous political outlook of the Socialists and of the decadent Royists who professed to uphold the 'constructive aspect of trade union work,' which in plain words meant abandoning class struggle and practising reformism.

Soon after this split both INTUC and HMS affiliated themselves to International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which organization itself was a product of split in the world trade union movement.

Some of the participants of the said meeting of 24 December 1948 who could not fall in line with the objects of HMS met in a separate meeting on 27 December 1948 at Calcutta and formed a United Trade Union Committee. Later in a conference convened by that committee on 30 April 1949 at Calcutta, another new organization of very limited strength, the United Trade Union Congress was formed. Mr. Mrinal Kanti Bose was elected the first president of this newly founded organization. But very soon with the breaking away of a number of members from the Revolutionary Socialist Party of India and formation of a new political party by them—the Socialist Unity Centre of India—this new national TU centre also became bifurcated and since then two central labour organizations bearing the same name of UTUC are running parallel to each other—one controlled by the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the other by the Socialist Unity Centre.

Hind Mazdoor Sabha too could not remain united for long. Internal dissension within the Socialist Party resulted in the reappearance of Hind Mazdoor Panchayat with a separate entity as parallel to HMS and controlled by a group of the Socialist Party.

The latest in the series is Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh which

appeared on the labour scene in 1955. Its principal founder Mr. D. B. Thengdi is a leader of Janasangh. In fact this organization has been created as the labour wing of Janasangh, the political party based on the reactionary philosophy of Hindu revivalism. It has got extremely limited influence among the workers and that too among the backward section of them.

All these separate national centres of labour fathered by the different political parties and groups thus acted as the vehicles for dissemination of the particular political ideologies of the controlling parties and in the process the working class of India has been rendered the victim of a multiplicity of political and ideological influences each vying with and sometimes running counter to each other much to the detriment of the cherished unity of the class.

The Economic Policy of the Government and the Post-Independence Struggles :

The new era ushered in by the independence of the country roused immense hopes and aspirations among all sections of the Indian people. Freed from the colonial bondage of about two hundred years, the pent-up feelings of the people burst forth and there was unbounded jubilation all around.

But independence was accompanied with inflationary spiral, terrific rise in prices and the continuous fall in the real wages of the workers. Further, as the ruling classes had embarked upon a path of building capitalism in the newly independent country particularly in an epoch when capitalism proved to be a decadent economic order, it brought in its wake untold hardships and sufferings for the toiling masses. This generated a powerful resistance of the working class all over the country.

As this resistance was spearheaded by the AITUC, the government let loose a reign of terror on it and its affiliated unions. Many offices of the AITUC unions were sealed, a large number of important leaders of the AITUC and its affiliated unions were either detained or forced to go underground. The government also embarked upon merciless persecution of the members and activists of the Communist Party of India and many militant cadres were inhumanly tortured or killed in the process. Although during the period 1948-50 the Communist Party of India as well as the AITUC committed certain left

sectarian mistakes, the strength of the Communist Party and also of AITUC lay in the fact that they never compromised the interests of the working masses and with unprecedented courage and selflessness they stood by the workers and the masses. They did impress upon the masses as sincere, sacrificing and the most fighting political and trade union organizations of the country. So even during this period, though sections of the working masses were hesitant to come within the fold of AITUC they looked upon the AITUC as the organization which stood to defend their interests.

Successive splits, however, considerably reduced the numerical strength of the AITUC which got another jolt by the resignation of Mr. N. M. Joshi from the office of general secretary by October 1948 on the question of a dispute about the choice of personnel of an AITUC delegation to the ILO. The actual reason of Mr. Joshi's resignation was that he did not want to recommend the name of a member of the CPI to the government when the CPI had been illegalized.

The twentythird session of the AITUC was held in Bombay during the end of 1949 almost in a condition of illegality. The session elected Mr. V. Chakkarai Chettiar as the president of AITUC.

Despite a virtual condition of illegality and severe repression, economic struggles of the working class reached an unprecedented resoluteness in the year 1950. The following table will show the position of the industrial actions of the working class during the period 1947-50, the last year in the series accounting for the largest number of working days lost since independence.

Year		No of stoppages	No. of workers involved	Working days lost
1947	...	1,811	1,840,784	16,562,666
1948	...	1,259	1,059,120	7,837,173
1949	...	920	605,457	6,600,295
1950	...	814	719,883	12,806,704

In order to strengthen the base of capitalism the ruling classes entered into a phase of planned development of the economy. The First , Second and Third Five Year Plans were implemented during the periods 1951-56, 1956-61 and 1961-

66, respectively. The Fourth Plan was also put into operation during the period from 1966-71.

After the victory of socialist revolution, Soviet Russia embarked upon a planned development of her socialist economy and since then all socialist countries have adopted the same method of economic progress. But today economic planning has become quite a common practice outside the socialist world also particularly among the newly liberated countries.

But these are capitalist plannings designed to build and strengthen capitalism in countries with various degrees of economic development, right from a number of African countries where existed a pre-capitalist economic structure down to countries like India with comparatively better developed capitalist economy. In present-day circumstances, these capitalist plannings are the most consummate expression of State capitalism designed in some measure to identify and somehow to regulate the operation of the laws of capitalism within the framework of the 'mixed' economy in the interests of the further development of capitalism itself. So, the net upshot of these plannings is inevitably manifested in fabulous accumulation of wealth on the one side and growing impoverishment on the other.

In India too these plannings did not satisfy the minimum basic needs of the working class and other toiling masses. As this chapter is not intended for any detailed discussion on the condition of the working class and their struggles but is meant to show only the general trend of events, it is not worthwhile here to discuss the effects of the plannings in all their aspects. A very few illustrations and certain cryptic observations made by some leading economists of the country relating to the effects of the plannings on the working class as cited below will, it is expected, drive home the issue.

It transpired from a study made by the committee headed by Prof. P. C. Mahalanobis that was appointed by the Planning Commission in October 1960 the *per capita* increase in national income during the first two plans averaged only about one per cent. Thanks to the high unevenness in the distribution pattern, this average *per capita* increase of one per cent actually implied that for the bulk of the population it was very much lower. According to another source, for the year 1955-56, 72 per cent of the population had an income lower than the average *per*

capita national income.¹

In regard to the wage position, the wages of factory workers as a whole, although unevenly among different industrial groups, marked an increase until 1955-56. Price indices for 1951, 1955 and 1957 were 105, 95 and 111 respectively, while the mean annual wages were Rs. 1,036, Rs. 1,173 and Rs. 1,234 respectively. This meant, by the middle of the 'fifties the wages had dropped to what they had been at the beginning of the period. Salaries of the white collar employees, far from increasing, had possibly even somewhat diminished.²

During the entire period from 1950 to 1962, mean annual wages of factory labour increased by about 50 per cent, but quite a good part of the income in the nominal wages was eaten up by the steady rise in the cost of living. The Indian trade union movement had repeatedly made justified complaints against tricky practices in preparing the cost of living index series by the Central as well as the State Governments. The official figures, suffer as they do from various imperfections, only partially reflect the actual rise in price. Even these imperfect calculations revealed an increase of about 30 per cent rise in prices, i.e., from 115.8 in 1950 to 150.3 in 1962. Further, according to another official calculation, the real earnings of factory workers increased over the last 12 years by about 10 per cent only, from 114.0 in 1950 to 126.5 in 1962. Even this meagre increase in real wages at the rate of less than one per cent per year has to be set off against the considerable rise in productivity, the index of which rose by about 30 per cent from 94.7 in 1950 to 129.7 in 1962.³

An official review has succinctly put up the trends of wage of factory labour during the first two plans according to which, 'Though the average annual money wages per worker show a rise in even prior to the beginning of the First Plan, the real wages of the factory workers reached the pre-war level only in 1953, when the increase in money wages more than compensated for the rise of the cost of living. . . . During the Second Plan period though the money wages level of factory workers continued to rise . . . the real wages level showed a fall. . . It was only in 1961 that the 1956 level of real wages per factory worker was restored.'⁴

So according to this official study though during the First

Plan period there was some fluctuating increase in real wages of the workers, during the Second Plan the real wages definitely declined. Thus while the worker's real wages declined during the plans, according to a noted Gandhian economist Dr. Gyan Chand,⁵ 'the industrialists, big merchants, and other privileged classes have mainly benefited from the increase of production and national income.'

The working class in this condition had to put up stiff resistance against this onslaught on their standard of living. This resistance broke out in the forms of strikes, industrywise and regionwise general strikes, mass demonstrations and various other mass actions. This industrial strikes of the working class marked a sharp rise from the period 1955-56, the culminating year of the First Plan. The following table will show the position of industrial disputes in India for the 12 years from 1951 to 1962.

Year	No. of stoppages	No. of workers involved	Working days lost
1951	... 1,071	691,321	3,818,928
1952	... 963	809,242	3,336,961
1953	... 772	466,607	3,382,608
1954	... 840	477,138	3,372,630
1955	... 11,666	527,767	5,697,848
1956	... 1,203	715,130	6,992,040
1957	... 1,630	889,371	6,429,319
1958	... 1,524	928,566	7,797,585
1959	... 1,531	693,616	5,633,148
1960	... 1,538	986,268	6,536,517
1961	... 1,357	511,860	4,918,755
1962	... 1,491	705,059	6,120,576

The figures in the above table indicate the uniformity of magnitude of the working-class struggles since 1955. This means that the working class of India conducted unceasing struggles without any slowing down for safeguarding and also in some cases for improving their standard of living. And these struggles encompassed all the industrial centres of the country without any exception.

During the plan periods many new industries came up on the industrial map of India. Steel and other heavy industries

were established. Right from shipbuilding and locomotive to pharmaceuticals and chemicals—different branches of industries, many of which so long unknown to India, now came to be established in India. Banking, insurance, and communication industries flourished, the administrative apparatus too likewise underwent considerable expansion. This industrial expansion correspondingly led to swelling of the numerical strength of the working class. In all factories and industrial units new unions were formed and the entire working class whether in the traditional industries or in the newly founded industries equally plunged into bitter struggles. Details of these innumerable number of industrial struggles require a separate volume by itself which is not, however, intended for the present study.

The new and spectacular development in the trade union movement of this period, particularly in the period after 1955-56, is the surging tide of the trade union movement of the government and other white collar employees. Exasperated by the stubborn attitude of the governments, whether at the Centre or at the States, to grant monetary compensation for the rise in the cost of living index and also their refusal to revise the anachronistic pay structure in conformity with the changed objective and social concepts, the Central and State government employees took recourse to combative programmes in their respective spheres. Another demand which roused the white collar employees as well as the industrial workers was the demand for need-based minimum wage. The 15th session of the Indian Labour Conference which was held at Delhi on 11-12 July 1957 determined certain norms for calculating need-based minimum wage and that decision of the 15th ILC spurred the employees and workers of the country to turbulent actions.

The 15th session of the Indian Labour Conference was a tripartite conference between the owners, the government and the labour and was presided over by the then Union Labour Minister Mr. Gulzarilal Nanda and thus the recommendations of the conference were practically of obligatory nature to all the parties concerned. The main conclusions and recommendations of the conference are noted below:

1. While accepting that the minimum wage was 'need-based' and should ensure the minimum human needs of the industrial workers, the following norms were accepted

as a guide for all wage fixing authorities including minimum wage committees, wage boards, adjudicators etc.

(i) In calculating the minimum wage the standard working-class family should be taken to comprise three consumption units for one earner, the earnings of women, children and adolescents being disregarded.

(ii) Minimum food requirements should be calculated on the basis of a net intake of calories as recommended by Dr. Aykroyd for average Indian adult of a moderate activity.

(iii) Clothing requirements should be estimated on the basis of a *per capita* consumption of 18 yards per annum, which would give for the average worker's family of four a total of 72 yards.

(iv) In respect of housing the rent corresponding to the minimum area provided for under Government's Industrial Housing Scheme should be taken into consideration in fixing the minimum wage.

(v) Fuel, lighting and other miscellaneous items of expenditure should constitute 20 per cent of the total minimum wage.

2. Wherever the minimum wage fixed was below the norms recommended above, it would be incumbent on the authorities concerned to justify the circumstances which prevented them from adherence to the aforesaid norms.

In view of the somewhat lower metabolism of the Indians, Dr. Aykroyd considered a net intake of 2,700 calories to be adequate for an average Indian adult of moderate activity.

Regarding dearness allowance, the First Central Pay Commission which reported in May 1947, i.e., before independence, enunciated certain principles. The cost of living index taken by the First Pay Commission was 1939=100 and it made all its consideration on the question of dearness allowance basing on the belief that the price levels had reached their peak in 1947. The Commission thus granted an increase of Rs. 5 for every increase of 20 points over the cost of living index beyond 180 at the lowest rung of pay scales and similarly fixed progressive scales for all other pay scales. It kept, however, a provision for a further change in dearness allowance if the cost of living index went beyond 280.

The Report of the Commission further stated that 'the State should *lead* and not merely follow the private employees' and 'a Government which proposes to sponsor minimum wage legislation for private industry must be ready to give the benefit of that principle to its own employees'.

These wage-fixing norms and principles stirred the government employees all over the country and various forms of struggles started bursting forth among the Central as well as the State government employees. Besides the question of wages and dearness allowance, the government employees felt also very much indignant over the continuance of the Government Servants' Conduct Rules made by the Britishers which divested the government employees of all trade union rights and severely curtailed their normal democratic rights. So the employees demanded total abolition or thorough modification of the rules to suit the present-day contexts.

The situation, however, became explosive with the publication of the Second Central Pay Commission's Report along with the decisions of the government on many of the recommendations in December 1959. While submitting memoranda to the Second Pay Commission many of the Central Government Employees' organizations worked out a minimum wage ranging from Rs. 110 to Rs. 137 per mensem at prices prevailing towards the end of 1957 on the basis of the principles and norms laid down by the 15th Indian Labour Conference. But the Second Pay Commission totally negated the question of accepting the principle of need-based minimum wage arguing that 'A minimum wage pitched above the level of *per capita* income, and intended for very wide application is obviously one beyond the country's capacity; in ignoring the vital need for savings and investment, such a wage gives no thought to the future; and a wage that exceeds the highest level, and far exceeds the general level in the organized industries is obviously not one needed for protecting those whose living standard are sub-average.'⁶

As regards the Central Government's commitment to the policy on minimum wage accepted by the 15th ILC, the Commission recorded the clarification obtained from the Ministry of Finance, Government of India which stated, 'that the recommendations of the Labour Conference should not be regarded as decision of Government and have not been formally ratified

by the Central Government. They should be regarded as what they are, namely, the recommendations of the Indian Labour Conference which is tripartite in character. Government have, at no time, committed themselves to taking executive action to enforce the recommendations.⁷

The Second Pay Commission took consumer price index member 1949=100 for adjusting trends in prices and regarding dearness allowance advised the government against an arrangement for automatic adjustment which according to them would place the government under an obligation to compensate any class of their employees to a particular extent in the event of a rise in the cost of living irrespective of the cause of rise and the circumstances existing at the time.

The Commission recommended that dearness allowance should continue as a separate element in the remuneration of the Central Government Employees and should be limited to employees whose salaries are below Rs. 300 per mensem. The Commission accordingly recommended grant of dearness allowance at the following rates

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|--------------------|
| (a) basic pay below Rs. 150 | ... | Rs. 10 per mensem |
| (b) basic pay of Rs. 150 or | | |
| above but below Rs. 300 | ... | Rs. 20 per mensem. |

The Commission stated further, 'Should the consumer price index continue to rise, the case of employees in the pay-range of Rs. 400 and above but below Rs. 1000 for grant of dearness allowance may be considered in the light of all the relevant circumstances at the time.'

The retrograde recommendations of the Secnd Pay Commission were universally deplored by the Central Government employees as well as by almost the entire trade union movement of the country. The Central employees' organizations urged reconsideration of the entire issue which government dogmatically refused. The employees' organizations then contemplated action to achieve their demand and so followed the most outstanding struggle of this period—the strike of the Central Government employees which highlighted the two most basic demands of the working class, the need-based minimum wage and linking dearness allowance with cost of living index.

A convention of the Central Government employees was then held in Bombay on 2-3 April 1960 which set up a Joint

Council of Action with representatives of the All India Railway-men's Federation, the National Federation of Post and Telegraph Employees, the All-India Defence Employees' Federation, and the Confederation of Central Government Employees, covering almost all sections of employees in departments of the Government of India. Mr. V. G. Dalvi, president of the NFPTE and Mr. Peter Alvares, the general secretary of the AIRF were elected chairman and secretary of the council.

The convention sought for negotiation with the government on the basis of a 6-point charter of demands which included payment of dearness allowance on the basis of the First Pay Commission's recommendations and the grant of a National Minimum wage in the light of the principle enunciated by the 15th ILC along with determination of differentials between class IV, III, II and I as well as between unskilled, semi-skilled and highly-skilled categories on a rational and equitable basis. The convention authorised the JCA to organise strike action in case of failure to secure satisfactory settlement of the demands.

The JCA had also invited the All-India Port and Dock Workers' Federation to join the strike since the dearness allowance of Port and Dock workers was also governed by the Pay Commission's recommendations. It had also invited the co-operation of INTUC, AITUC, HMS and UTUC and of those unions of Central Government employees outside the JCA. INTUC, however, opposed the strike which they blamed as 'ill-advised' and 'anti-national'.

The government, however, banged all doors for a negotiated settlement of the demands and on 8 July 1960 the contemplated strike was declared illegal through presidential proclamation of an Ordinance, *viz.* The Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance, 1960. Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India declared the imminent strike as a 'civil rebellion', and expressed his determination to firmly meet the challenge.

The strike was to commence from the midnight of July 11. As the zero hour approached a large number of leaders and activists who were working for strike were rounded up. Yet, the strike commenced as scheduled and brought the entire country almost to a dead halt. Besides large-scale arrests, the government resorted to police actions to thwart the progress of

the strike. The Police, the Home Guard, and the Territorial Army were mobilized in full force to meet the challenge of the strike. Even the Army was kept in readiness. The Police took recourse to lathi charges on the striking employees in several places and on two occasions the strikers were fired upon. Firing at Dohad, a railway workshop on the Western Railway resulted in the death of five striking workers.

Besides arrest of over 20,000 people and lathi charge and police firing resulting into several deaths, at least 1,500 employees were dismissed from service, about 10,000 were placed under suspension and more than 1,500 were convicted and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.

Thus the government confronted the employees with massive victimization and an indiscriminate and excessive use of power. In this situation the members of the Joint Council of Action who were free met at Delhi on July 16, to consider the developments and advised the employees to withdraw the strike. On July 17, the employees returned to work. Thus ended the five glorious days of struggle of the Central Government employees.

This historic strike was supported by the three Central trade unions, AITUC, HMS and UTUC and by all opposition political parties. The trade unions in other industries not covered by the central trade unions also unequivocally supported the strike. The strike received support from abroad from such organizations as Trade Unions International of Public and Allied Employees, All-Indonesia Trade Union Centre, National Federation of Posts and Telegraphs and Telephone Workers of France, and Japanese Public Service Workers' Union.

In the face of a terribly adverse circumstances though this strike ended without immediately achieving any of the demands, it left a deep imprint on the future struggles of the working class of the country, the white collar employees in particular. Its blaze continued to light up the fighting spirit of the employees and workers and the decade that followed witnessed a storm of trade union struggle of unprecedented sweep and strength shaking the entire country.

Simultaneous with the attempt of overpowering the struggle of the Central Government employees with all the might at the State's disposal, the government successively took certain

steps which in effect deprived the workers of a reasonable share of the nation's prosperity. The Bonus Commission that was appointed in 1962 and reported in 1964 fixed the minimum limits of bonus at 4 per cent and 20 per cent respectively allowing free hand to the employers to manipulate the balance sheets so as to keep the bonus at the minimum level. These recommendations and the government decision thereon that was announced in September 1964 denying adequate bonus to the workers caused deep resentment among them. The employers on the other hand opposed vigorously the idea of a minimum bonus and wanted full liberty to deprive the workers altogether.

The National Labour Commission that was appointed next and functioned during 1966-68 totally negated the norms laid down by the 15th Indian Labour Conference for fixation of need-based minimum wage subordinating the basic rights for need-based minimum wage to industry's capacity to pay. While the employees and workers in the LIC, Oil Companies and various other industries had been conducting bitter struggles against introduction of automation which alarmingly threatened the job security of the workers and reduced job potential, the Commission in its report gave a green signal to the introduction of all job-killing devices and euphorically said, 'Rationalization and automation have an important rôle to play in the developing countries'. The most retrograde way of thinking of the Commission was revealed in its recommendation for an Industrial Relation Commission at State and Central level vested with dictatorial powers in all aspects of industrial relations. According to the recommendation, the contemplated IRC would have the authority to conciliate and adjudicate in all the disputes and also to decide as to which union should be recognized. The IRC would have the power also to prohibit strikes and could ask a union to withdraw strike after 30 days of its existence.

Side by side, the government also made certain legislations, which the workers condemned as 'Black Acts', designed to contain the strikes and other industrial actions of the working class. The Essential Services Maintenance Act which was promulgated as an Ordinance to illegalize the July 1960 strike of the Central Government employees and the subsequent token strike on 19 September 1968 thereafter came to stay permanently in the

statute book of India. This Act was accompanied by the formation of a Central Industrial Security Force to be stationed in different industrial units as a counter measure to the workers' trade union activities.

While these checks and counter-checks were being scrupulously designed to put constraints upon the workers' struggles, the big industrial houses were allowed to delightfully pocket excessive profits. The net profit after tax of 101 giant companies studied by *The Economic Times* showed a rise from 10,290 million rupees during 1967-68 to 11,233 million rupees during 1968-69 which meant a rise of 10 per cent in only one year. Against this rise in industrial profits, according to the figures published by the government of India from year to year in the Indian Labour Statistics, the real wages of the workers underwent a steady fall. Taking 1961 = 100, the index of real wages in 1964 came down to 94.9, in 1965 it was 96.8, in 1966 it again came down to 91.3 and in 1967 it further came down to 80.9. Along with this fall in real income, the retrenchment, rationalization and automation led to colossal growth of unemployment severely affecting the working class and middle class families.

Force of circumstances therefore led the working class and the white collar employees to the path of determined resistance. The decade following 1960 provided a luminous spectacle of militant strikes and other forms of unit and factory-wise, industrywise as well as regionwise trade union actions of the working class, the white collar employees and the school and college teachers. The trade union actions of the State Government employees that took place during this period appeared as a new phenomenon in the trade union history of India. All-pervasively it started since 1955-56, but beginning with the protracted 62 days' strike of five lakh State Government employees of Uttar Pradesh the intermittent strike actions of four million State employees spread out like wild fire and engulfed the entire country. In fact except the State of Tamilnadu, all other States of the country were frequently rocked by resolute and protracted strike actions of the employees. These struggles brought in its train victimization of unheard-of dimensions in the form of arrest, dismissal, super-session, break-in-service and various other punitive measures.

The All India State Government Employees' Federation played a commendable role in giving a co-ordinated and integrated shape to all these struggles. It is to be specially noted that at the call of the Federation, since 5 January 1967, the employees in a number of States embarked on a co-ordinated strike action.

The joint struggles of the Central and State government employees marked another significant feature of this period.

The anti-automation movement of the LIC employees in particular which reached peak height during 1967-69 period gave a new direction to the Indian trade union movement.

About 2.5 million Central Government employees again performed a glorious feat of strike action on 19 September 1968. Because of its all-India character and particularly because of the basic demands which the one day's token strike mightily raised, the strike assumed a special significance in the trade union struggles of this period.

All attempts for a negotiated settlement of the employees' grievances having failed, a Joint Council of Action consisting of the Confederation of the Central Government Employees' and Workers' Associations and Unions, All India Defence Employees' Federation, All India Railwaymen's Federation and National Federation of Post and Telegraph Employees was formed with Mr. S. M. Joshi as the chairman to conduct the strike on the following main demands:

1. Merger of Dearness Allowance in basic pay.
2. Need-based minimum wage.
3. Full neutralization of the rise in prices.
4. Withdrawal of the proposal to retire employees, who are alleged to be ineffective or whose integrity is allegedly in doubt, at 50 years of age.

The strike was banned by promulgation of two Ordinances—the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance and another primarily aiming at the railwaymen. The Ordinance provided penal measures in the form of imprisonment for six months to one year and a fine of Rs. 1,000 or both.

AITUC, HMS and UTUC and various other trade unions and national federations unconnected with the central trade unions actively came out in support of the strike while INTUC and National Federation of Indian Railwaymen, a Congress-sponsored rival organization of AIRF opposed the strike.

The government severely dealt with the strike and in consequence of police actions fifteen persons lost their lives and hundreds others were injured. About 48,000 temporary employees were served with termination notices and the total number of persons arrested and prosecuted under the Ordinance crossed the ten thousand mark. It is to be noted, however, that despite this widespread repression, the United Front Government in the State of Kerala headed by the communists refused to take action against the striking employees despite threat and tremendous pressure by the Union Government. Ultimately, however, most of the victimizations were vacated. The long drawn-out struggle of the working class against victimization reached high watermark in the observance of the Anti-Victimization Day on 19 August 1969 jointly by the six million Central and State employees which indeed was a noteworthy addition to the working-class struggles during this period.

The direct outcome of this strike was the appointment of the Third Central Pay Commission in April 1970. The report of the Commission was, however, published after long 3 years in 1973.

Despite the gross underestimation of the magnitude of the strike struggles, the official statistics show a remarkable upswing of the struggles during this period. In the year 1966, 1.4 million workers were involved in 2,556 industrial disputes which caused a loss of approximately 13.85 million working days. West Bengal accounted for the highest number of working days lost, i.e., 3.8 million, closely followed by Maharashtra with a 3.3 million number. Kerala came next with a total working day loss of 2.3 million.

In 1967 the disputes indicated a big jump. In that year 2,815 disputes involved nearly 1.5 million workers causing a loss of about 17.2 million working days. West Bengal again accounted for the highest loss of working days—the figure reaching 5.9 million mark, followed by Kerala with 2.3 million and Maharashtra coming next with 2.2 million. The year 1968 witnessed 2,776 industrial disputes involving 1.7 million workers which resulted in a loss of greater number of working days to the tune of 17.25 million approximately. West Bengal claimed the highest number of working days lost—the figure reaching as high as 7.3 million, followed successively by Kerala with

2.5 million, Tamilnadu with 2.4 million and Maharashtra with 1.7 million. In 1969, an unprecedented upswing of struggles was witnessed in West Bengal accounting for a loss of 9.8 million working days while corresponding figures for Kerala and Maharashtra were recorded to be as 1.4 million and 1.2 million respectively. The industries which were mainly involved in these struggles were: engineering, cotton textile, coal mines, jute textiles, chemicals, electricity, cinema, road and water transport industries, ports and docks.

Some special characteristics of the struggle of this period were that, (i) greater number of struggles were fought in West Bengal and Kerala, (ii) the struggles often assumed protracted form, on some occasions lasting for even 7 or 8 months at a stretch, (iii) the workers displayed growing cohesion and militancy, faced victimization undauntedly and participated in greater solidarity actions, (iv) the struggles gave rise to national level combinations of different central trade unions and national federations leading to several joint and co-ordinated programmes on common issues, and (v) the workers displayed a more mature political consciousness which was amply reflected by their massive participation in the political general strikes and other political struggles of the period.

Certain Far-Reaching Political Changes :

If more and more self-assertion by the various political parties is considered as one of the most important political phenomenon in the post-independence period, the metamorphosis of different political parties as well as their various groupings and regroupings is also to be considered as no less important than the first one. A number of opposition parties underwent these changes but in regard to the impact on the national life in general, the split in the National Congress in the year 1966 undoubtedly bore greater significance. Multiple of factors accounted for these changes, but the split that afflicted the National Congress was evidently the outcome of the deep economic crisis that the country has been landed into.

But so far as the working class and the oppressed people in particular are concerned, the split that occurred into the Communist Party of India was of far-reaching effect. The approach towards the ruling classes of the country, the attitude towards

the revolutionary dialectics of Marxian political philosophy and the developments in the international communist movement created dissensions within the party which ultimately resulted into a vertical split in the Indian communist movement. The split was precipitated as the dominant section of the leadership of the Party more and more veered round the ruling classes and took to the path of collaboration than that of opposition. Those who nursed an attitude of uncompromising opposition to the bourgeois-landlord rule, firmly adhered to the revolutionary dialectics of Marxism and opposed Right deviation of the national and international communist movement had ultimately to take an independent course and convened the Seventh Congress of the Party in Calcutta from 31 October to 7 November 1964 and organized Communist Party of India (Marxist). Besides partial influence in various States, this party gained strong mass base in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura particularly.

The general elections held in 1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967 indicated steadily growing strength of the communist movement in India and accelerating gravitation of the working class towards communist ideology. In the general elections of 1957, in Kerala the Communist Party emerged as the majority group and formed ministry. This ministry led by the communists gave a new direction to labour policy and the trade unions flourished to a great extent. But the vested interests contrived a reactionary movement to topple the ministry, which having failed, the Government of India intervened and dismissed the ministry.

The general elections of 1967 marked the political map of India with great changes. Various opposition parties—both the rightists and leftists though contesting separately—together won majority in a number of States. Non-Congress ministries were formed in these States, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) fared particularly well in Kerala and West Bengal and joined the United Front ministries in those two States. But various manipulations were made to pull down the ministries and it succeeded to a great extent. In the subsequent mid-term elections in West Bengal the Communist Party of India (Marxist) fared much better and in 1971 it emerged as the single largest group. United Front Ministry was again formed in West Bengal in 1969 but underhand intrigues brought the collapse of that ministry too. Anyway, the labour policies pursued by

the United Front Governments of Kerala and West Bengal opened up new vistas to the labour movement in these two States and through bitter class struggle uninterfered by the State-machinery, the working class was able to wrest considerable gains from the unwilling hands of the capitalists.

AITUC During the Period :

The twentyfourth session of the AITUC was held on 27-30 May 1954 at Calcutta after a lapse of five years from the previous session.

830 delegates and 69 fraternal delegates belonging to unions affiliated to HMS, INTUC and also independent federations and unions attended the session. The number of unions affiliated at the time of the session was 937 with a membership of 655,940. In a document adopted by the session an appeal was made calling for united action of all sections of the working class 'in defence of their rights as workers as well as human beings'.

The session elected Mr. Chakkarai Chettiar and Mr. S. A. Dange as president and general secretary respectively.

Between the twentyfourth session of the AITUC and the twentyfifth Silver Jubilee Session lay a period of tremendous growth of the AITUC, both in organization and in influence.

The Silver Jubilee Session of the AITUC held at Ernakulam in 1957 was a great assembly of trade union representatives hardly ever held in India. 1,282 delegates including 31 women delegates representing 947,239 members attended the session. The total membership of the AITUC was, however, claimed to have stood over 1.4 million. 182 fraternal delegates also attended this session. For the first time, fraternal delegates from the World Federation of Trade Unions, Central Council of Trade Unions of USSR, All China Federation of Trade Unions, Revolutionary Trade Union Movement of Czechoslovakia, Central Council of Trade Unions, Romania, General Confederation of Labour of France, General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea and the Vietnam Confederation of Labour attended the session. Mr. E. M. S. Namboodripad, the then Chief Minister of Kerala inaugurated the session. Mr. V. K. R. Menon, Director, ILO, New Delhi Office was invited to the session and he also greeted it.

The report placed by the general secretary Mr. S. A.

Dange defined the policy of the AITUC in relation to the industrialization of the country and the Second Five Year Plan and also the question of demands of the working people. This policy which was characterized as Two-Pillar policy envisaged co-operation with the government in the development of economy and defence of the interests of the working class in that economy. The general secretary's report also enunciated a 17-point programme which included among others 'development of the national economy and fulfilment of the essential features of the Plan for national prosperity'.

Mr. S. S. Mirajkar and Mr. S. A. Dange were elected by the session as president and general secretary respectively of AITUC for the next term.

This Silver Jubilee Session in fact indicated a new turn in the policy of the AITUC. The AITUC was controlled by the communists though some non-communist left-wingers were also there. The moment at which the Silver Jubilee Session met witnessed certain serious changes that had started taking place in the international communist movement. Symptoms of right deviation in the international communist movement were visible. The same deviation affected a section of the leadership of the Communist Party of India too as has been noted earlier and the policy document submitted in the Silver Jubilee Session greatly reflected the change in attitude. The Two-Pillar policy enunciated by Mr. Dange was the consummate expression of the policy of co-operation with the ruling bourgeoisie. In course of time this policy assumed a more unveiled form and created grave internal rift among the communists.

When the Marxists who opposed Right deviation of the communist movement formed Communist Party of India (Marxist), the difference within AITUC further widened. This section of the communists blamed Mr. Dange and his trusted followers in the AITUC as betraying the cause of the working class and sacrificing the workers' interests at the altar of the bourgeoisie and fought for reversal of that policy. They particularly criticized the role of Mr. Dange and his men and made allegations of betraying utterly bureaucratic attitude in controlling the affairs of the AITUC, of adopting a class-collaborationist path in guiding the activities of various unions under their control, of playing a docile and prejudicial role in various com-

missions and committees appointed by the government. The role of Mr. Dange as member of the Bonus Commission and the role of his nominees in the various Study Groups set up by the National Labour Commission were also subjected to scathing criticism.

Although the Marxists belonging to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) remained within AITUC for long 6 years since 1964, ultimately they found no point in remaining within AITUC which they considered as of no further use for revolutionary trade union movement and so went ahead to form a separate national centre of the Indian labour for guiding trade union activities on revolutionary principles.

Birth of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions :

The members of the General Council of AITUC and the State Committee members who were antagonistic to the class-collaborationist policy decisions of the dominant leadership met at a convention at Goa on 9-10 April 1970. That convention decided to hold the All India Trade Union Conference with a view to giving shape to a new and fighting national centre of the Indian labour. Accordingly a Reception Committee was constituted for the purpose with Mr. Jyoti Basu and Mr. Monoranjan Roy as chairman and general secretary respectively. The All India Trade Union Conference was thereafter held at Lenin Nagar, Ranji Stadium, Calcutta on 28-30 May 1970.

Mr. Jyoti Basu in his welcome address pointed out the historical necessity of setting up of another national centre as a rallying organization for the militant working class of India. Thus he stated,⁸

We have assembled here from all parts of the country to take decisions which are going to be of vital importance to the future of the trade union and working class movement in our country and the most important of these decisions will be the one for setting up of a new All India Trade Union Centre. Considering the multiplicity of trade union centres already existing in India the setting up of another centre may seem to be a divisive act. But, on the contrary, such a centre has now become a historical necessity as a rallying organization for the militant working class of India. The AITUC which we all helped to build up with hard work and great sacrifices of our ordinary comrades has been transformed into an instrument of surrender to the bourgeoisie and a drag on determined militant struggles, by the revisionists who have seized its

leadership and made it their special preserve by undemocratic method of functioning and keeping out representative unions on which they have no control.

Reformist trade union leaders and trade union centres have always tried to hold the trade union movement within the confines of economic struggle. Today, the revisionist AITUC centre is following in the same foot-steps. The revisionist leaders of the AITUC have eschewed the working class standpoint and policies and can never prepare the working class either, for militant working-class struggles or for the political struggle against the ruling class. Once a trade union leadership abandons this task—it cannot but degenerate into an appendage of the bourgeoisie. The leadership of the AITUC daily and hourly attempts to infuse into the working people their policies of collaboration with the bourgeoisie and acceptance of their leadership.

Then after referring to the role of the AITUC leadership in entering into 'anti-worker agreements' in individual establishments, the 'treacherous role they have played in government-appointed tripartite and other committees', as for example, 'from Dange's own performance in the Bonus Commission to the various leaders of the group who were appointed on the Study Groups of the National Labour Commission' and these leaders' efforts 'to keep the working class of India away from the consciousness of internationalism', Mr. Jyoti Basu concluded,⁹ 'This is the situation which has forced the need for a real democratic and revolutionary trade union centre which will lead the working class into militant economic struggles and simultaneously politicalize them and prepare them for the struggle for power and rally them in support of the anti-imperialist struggle in all parts of the country.'

The main report was placed in the conference by Mr. P. Ramamurthy. Pointing out in his report that 'the setting up of this new All India Centre has become a necessity for carrying on the struggle for unity' and urging that 'the struggle for unity of the trade union movement at the base level must continue with still greater vigour', Mr. Ramamurthy in his report declared, 'We stand for one union in one industry or factory. We do not want to divide trade unions on the basis of political affiliation. We seek to unite the workers in a common trade union because the interests of the workers as against those of the employers are common and they have to unitedly carry on their struggle.'¹⁰

The conference was a largely attended working-class affair. It appears from the Report of the Credential Committee placed in the Conference by Dr. M. K. Pandhe, 'that 1759 unions having a total membership of 804,637 had joined the conference and sent 4,264 numbers of delegates. Moreover, 116 delegates and 1,134 observers had been sent by fraternal unions, making the total number of participation to 5,514.'¹¹

A number of resolutions on national and international questions were adopted in the conference.

The proceedings of the conference were summed up by Mr. B. T. Ranadive. Dilating on the national and international context and the circumstances necessitating the birth of a militant trade union centre, Mr. Ranadive very sharply delineated the great tasks of the Indian trade union movement and concluded saying,¹² 'The trade union movement can never forget that Socialism and freedom from exploitation will remain words if the working class does not consciously struggle to capture power; and that the first step towards it is to remove the present bourgeois-landlord government by a genuine people's government. To constantly struggle to replace the present government, to initiate and participate in the democratic struggles in alliance with the peasantry, to support the struggles for agrarian revolution, . . . for this purpose to throw its full weight for effecting a united front of all democratic forces—these are the necessary tasks of the trade union movement.'

The conference ended in an open session held on 31 May 1970 at Brigade Parade Ground, Calcutta under the presidency of Mr. B. T. Ranadive, where nearly a million of workers and other common people participated.

Mr. B. T. Ranadive and Mr. P. Ramamurthy were elected president and general secretary of this newly born organization, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Since then a host of changes, of grave import to the lives of the Indian people, have taken place in the political scene of India. Working class actions too excelled all previous records. Two million State Government Employees' one day's token strike on 9 April 1974 and above all the 20-day long united strike of about two million railwaymen commencing on 8 May 1974 and the all-India solidarity strike of the working class on 15 May 1974 to back up the railwaymen's strike are actions with-

out parallel. The working class of India is standing today at a crucial juncture of Indian history and the great historic responsibility that confronts this revolutionary class can be best summed up in the words of Marx as said in the *Communist Manifesto*, 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle for democracy.'

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INDEX

- Adhikary, Dr. Ganghadhar, 294
 Advance Guard, 226
 Agarwala, Ramjash, 186
 Ahmad, Muzaffar, 197, 198, 199,
 225, 250, 268, 280, 283, 284, 289,
 292, 296, 298, 299, 360
 Ahmad, Samsuddin, 283
 Ahmedabad Congress, 129, 193
 Ahmedabad Mill Mazdoor Union,
 340
 Ahmedabad Mill-Owners' Associa-
 tion, 79, 151, 211, 232
 Ahmedabad Textile Labour Asso-
 ciation (Majoor Mahajan), 148, 149,
 155, 332, 340, 342, 349, 367, 368,
 387, 411
 Ali, Aruna Asaf, 409
 All Bengal Ministerial Officers' Asso-
 ciation, 428
 All Bengal Teachers' Association,
 430
 All China Federation of Trade
 Unions, 453
 All India Administrative Officers'
 Union, 425
 All India Bank Employees' Associa-
 tion, 429
 All India Defence Employees' Fede-
 ration, 445, 449
 All India Federation of Teachers,
 430
 All India Insurance Employees'
 Association, 429
 All India Postal and R.M.S. Asso-
 ciation, 219, 406, 423, 424, 426
 All India Port and Dock Workers'
 Federation, 445
 All India Red Trade Union Con-
 gress, 309, 310, 337, 339, 340,
 346, 347, 348, 352
 All India Railwaymen's Federation,
 219, 246, 251, 257, 258, 310, 330,
 331, 342, 363, 427, 445, 449
 All India Reserve Bank Employees'
 Association, 427
 All India State Government Em-
 ployees' Federation, 429, 449
 All India Telegraph Union, 404
 All India Textile Workers' Confe-
 rence, 333
 All India Trade Union Congress,
 134, 154, 161, 163, 165, 166, 167,
 168, 174, 176, 178, 179, 182, 185,
 186, 188, 189, 190, 191, 210, 213,
 214, 217, 218, 219, 220, 222, 223,
 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 236, 246,
 248, 250, 279, 280, 282, 283, 285,
 291, 299, 300, 301, 302, 304, 305,
 306, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313,
 337, 342, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348,
 352, 356, 366, 367, 369, 370, 383,
 386, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395,
 396, 397, 405, 406, 410, 411, 427,
 430, 434, 436, 437, 445, 446, 449,
 453, 454, 455, 456
 All India Youth League, 324
 All Party Conference, 235
 Alvares, Peter, 445
 Alve, Arjun Atmaram, 294, 334
 Amalgamated Society of Railway
 Servants, 220
 Amalgamated Union of Engineers,
 London, 226
 Ambedkar, Dr. B. R., 367
 Amrita Bazar Patrika, on strike of
 plantation Labour, 65; strike in
 Budge Budge Jute Mill in 1895,
 83; strike in Government Press
 in 1905, 92, 93; 97, 197, 247,
 269, 327, 328
 Amritsar Congress, 173
 Amta-Howrah Light Railway, 253
 Ananda Bazar Patrika, 254
 Andrews, Rev. C. F., 148, 163, 178,
 210, 223, 226, 254, 271, 273, 274,
 280, 281, 427
 Anglo-French War, 5, 7
 Arch Bishop of York, 295
 Arkwright, Richard, 3, 6
 Assam Labour Enquiry Committee
 of 1921, 64, 68
 Assam Plantation Labour Investiga-
 tion Act, 47
 Assam Tea Company, 24, 59
 Atlee, Clement, 286, 402, 412
 Auckland, 24
 Australian Communist Party, 282
 Ayengar, A. Srinivasan, 279
 Ayengar, Rangaswami, 279
 Akroyd, Dr., 442
 Azad, Moulana Abulkalam, 126,
 401, 406
 Babeuf, 13
 Bakhale, R. R., 214, 217, 283, 300,
 303, 334, 344, 370

- Bakuninism, 12
 Baldwin, 283
 Banerjee, A. C., 94, 97
 Banerjee, Charu Chandra, 393
 Banerjee, Sashipada, 72, 73
 Banerjee, Sibnath, 218, 250, 253, 289, 294, 352, 360, 369, 405, 409
 Banerjee, Dr. Suresh Chandra, 370, 390, 409, 411
 Banerjee, Surendranath, 90
 Banerjee, W. C., 70
 Baptista, Josheph, 163, 166, 169, 176, 186, 190, 211, 220
 Barbusse, 283
 Bardoli, Gopinath, 405
 Barton, H., 424
 Barucha, 99, 279
 Basak, Gopal, 293
 Basu, Jyoti, 455, 456
 Basu, Sarat Chandra, 247, 406
 Battle of Plassey, 2, 52
 B. B. & C.I. Railway, 115, 368
 B. B. & C. I. Railway Workers' Union, 302, 342
 Belakun, 173
 Bengal Administrative Report, 83
 Bengal Chamber of Commerce, 102
 Bengal Coal Company, 23
 Bengal Industrial Dispute Enquiry Committee, 157
 Bengal Jute Workers' Association, 218, 269
 Bengal Jute Workers' Union, 269, 340
 Bengal Mariners' Union, 345
 Bengal-Nagpur Railway, 102, 245, 248, 250
 Bengal Nagpur Railway Labour Union, 247, 248, 249, 251, 252, 350
 Bengal Press Workers' Union, 93
 Bengal Secretariat Employees' Association, 428
 Bengalee, Sorabjee Shapurjee, 49, 73, 78
 Bengal Trade Union Federation, 219, 224, 247, 267
 Besant, Annie, 124, 145, 163, 165, 174
 Bharat Sramajibi, 72
 Bharatiya Janasangh, 435
 Bharatiya Majdoor Sangh, 435
 Bill of Conspiracies of Victuallers and Craftsmen, 6
 Birla, G. D., 279
 Black Death, 4
 Blanquism, 12
 Bole, S. K., 115
 Bombay Central Labour Board, 219
 Bombay Factory Labour Commission of 1885, 44
 Bombay Industrial Disputes Act 1939, 362, 365, 366, 367, 379, 410
 Bombay Industrial Disputes Committee, 142
 Bombay Industrial Relations Act, 410
 Bombay Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha, 115
 Bombay Mill-Hands' Association, 74, 86, 115
 Bombay Mill-Owners' Association, 75, 100, 141, 211
 Bombay Mill Workers' Union, 260, 261
 Bonus Commission, 447, 455, 456
 Bose, K. G., 405
 Bose, Dr. Maitreyee, 405
 Bose, Mrinal Kanti, 247, 280, 303, 345, 392, 393, 405, 435
 Bose, Subhas Chandra, 129, 223, 234, 254, 275, 303, 307, 310, 312, 313, 314, 324, 342, 360, 375, 399
 Bose, Prematosh, 97
 Bradley, B. F., 283, 294, 295, 298
 Brahmo Samaj, 72, 73
 Brelvi, S. A., 163, 165
 British Bureau of Red Trade Union International, 187, 224, 225
 British Communist Party, 280, 281, 295
 British Indian Association, 42
 British Industrial Court Act, 157
 British Labour Party, 174, 189, 286
 British Trade Union Congress, foundation of, 12; delegation, 63; 161, 188, 214, 241
 Buchanan, D. H., 37, 77
 Byron, 6
 Cabet, Etienne, 11
 Cabinet Mission, 412
 Calcutta Congress, 127, 128, 235, 290
 Calcutta Tramwaymen's Union, 289, 340
 Campbell, J. M., 74
 Capital, 16
 Cawnpore Communist Conspiracy Case, 198, 346
 Central Council of Trade Unions of U.S.S.R., 227, 453
 Central Council of Trade Unions, Romania, 453
 Central Pay Commission, 425, 442, 443, 444, 450
 Centre of Indian Trade Unions, 457

- Chakravarty, Gopendranath, 250, 268, 293
 Chakravarty, Shyamsundar, 97
 Charter of Trade Unions—of England, 12
 Chartist Movement, beginning of, 9; end of and characteristics of, 10; international traits, 13
 Chelmsford, Lord, 228
 Chetti, G. Chelvapathi, 146
 Chettiar, Singaravelu, 250, 255, 256, 275, 284
 Chettiar, V. Chakkarai, 437, 453
 Chicherov, A. I., 108, 112
 Churchill, Winston, 172, 402
 Clow, A., 279
 Combination Acts, 5, 6, 8
 Communist Manifesto, 11, 13, 14
 Communist International, 28, 192, 197, 198, 199, 201, 227, 314, 319, 320, 346, 354
 Communist Party of India, 167, 192, 193, 194, 196, 198, 228, 229, 296, 337, 346, 365, 369, 376, 386, 389, 409, 436, 437, 451, 454
 Communist Party of India (Marxist), 452, 454, 455
 Communist Workers' Education Society, 13
 Confederation of Central Government Employees' and Workers' Associations and Unions, 426, 449
 Congress Mazdoor Sevak Sangh, 409
 Congress Socialist Party, 349, 389, 406
 Continental Revolution, 12
 Cornwallis, Lord, 18
 Cripps Mission, 374, 375
 Crompton, Samuel, 3
 Curzon, Lord, 26

 Dacca Prokash, 63
 Daily Herald, 172, 174, 176
 Daily Tribune, 15
 Dainik Basumati, 247
 Dalhousie, Lord, 26
 Dalvi, V. G., 404, 406, 445
 Dange, S. A., 154, 166, 167, 168, 198, 250, 280, 281, 282, 283, 293, 369, 385, 394, 395, 453, 454, 455
 Das, C. R., 95, 97, 129, 186, 195, 210, 221, 223, 224
 Darsanananda, Swami, 215
 Das, Dr. R. K., 65, 79, 138, 139, 218
 Das, Dr. Sundari Mohan, 247
 Dasgupta, Nalinibhusan, 198
 Dasgupta, Probbabati, 269
 Daud, Muhammad, 280, 345
 Davar, Cowasji Nanabhoy, 24
 Deo, Sankarrao, 409
 Defence of India Rules, 123
 Desai, Khandubhai, 411
 Desai, M. G., 294
 Deshpande, S. V., 264, 301, 302, 304, 309, 310, 338
 Devi, Savitri, 190
 Dhruva, Anandashankar, 151
 Dimitrov, Georgi, 320
 Dinabandhu, 73
 Drewett, Tom, 39
 Dufferin, Lord, 26
 Duke of Norfolk, 418
 Dundee Jute Trade Union, 243
 Dutt, Bhupendra Nath, 250, 283, 310
 Dutt, Clemens Palme, 228
 Dutt, Rajani Palme, 127, 139, 144, 235
 Dwarkadas, Kanji, 212, 214
 Dyer, 124

 East India Company, 15, 18, 19; discovery of jute, 24; end of administrative control, 24; revision of Charter, 29; tea trade, 59; 414
 East India Railway, 94, 101, 102, 103, 106, 215, 216, 252, 253, 342
 East India Railway Employees' Union, 95, 254, 289
 Education Workers' International, 430
 Eienstein, Albert, 295
 Elizabethan Statute of Artificers, 4
 Employees' and Workers' (Disputes) Act of 1860, 47, 48
 Engles, Frederick, 11
 English Industrial Court, 157
 Englishman, 216
 Everet, 6
 Exiles League, 11

 Factory Act of 1891, 78
 Factory Act of 1911, 116
 Factory Labour Commission of 1890, 78, 100
 Fawcett Justice, 262
 Federation of the Just, 11
 Federation of Postal and Telegraph Union, 425
 First International, 11
 Foley, 32, 97
 Foreman's Association of India, 419
 Fort, Glouster Mills, 24
 Forward Bloc, 375
 Fourier, Charles F. M., 11
 Fraser, Andrew, 93

- Freer Smith Committee, 38
 French Revolution, 5, 7, 13
 Friendly Societies, 8
 Fulton, 3
 Ganabani, 206, 225, 292
 Gandhi-Irwin Agreement, 313, 323, 324
 Gandhi, M. K., 123, 124, 125, 126, 128, 129, 131, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 166, 167, 174, 184, 186, 190, 192, 195, 222, 223, 234, 235, 236, 271, 272, 273, 290, 321, 322, 323, 324, 332, 368, 369, 374, 387, 390, 411
 Gandhi Sevak Sangh, 367
 Ganguly, Dwarkanath, 64
 Garibaldi, 13
 Gaya Congress, 197, 198, 222
 General Confederation of Labour of France, 453
 General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea, 453
 George, Loyd, 127
 Ghadr Movement, 124
 Ghat, S. V., 280, 284, 293, 339, 369
 Ghose, Aurobindo, 114
 Ghosh, A. K., 93, 96, 97
 Ghosh, Arabinda, 429
 Ghosh, Kishorilal, 247, 280, 283, 293
 Ghosh, Rashiklal, 78
 Ghosh, Surendramohan, 406
 Ginwala, F. J., 212, 214, 258, 303
 G.I.P. Railway, 215, 216, 256, 342
 G.I.P. Railway Workers' Union, 247, 302, 304
 Giri, V.V., 226, 246, 247, 249, 250, 251, 257, 258, 280, 300, 303, 307, 308, 331, 336, 344, 345, 346, 390, 393, 427
 Girni Kamgar Mahamandal, 260, 261, 262
 Girni Kamgar Sangh, 217
 Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag), 217, 261, 263, 264, 265, 284, 301, 302, 304, 309, 314, 315, 334, 339, 345, 348, 352, 385, 388, 389
 Glading, Percy E., 226
 Gladstone, 13
 Glasgow Trade Union Congress, 148
 Godfrey, Admiral, 400
 Gokhale, Abantikaibai, 166
 Goswami, Dharani, 250, 293
 Goswami, T. C., 251
 Government Servants' Conduct Rules, 414, 415, 416, 443
 Govind Ganpat, 110
 Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, 8, 9
 Great Indian Railway Company, 23
 Great Peninsular Railway Company, 23
 Greely, Horace, 11
 Gupta, Santosh Kumari, 224, 283
 Guruswami, 345
 Gyanchand, Dr., 440
 Habeas Corpus, 6
 Haldar, S., 97
 Halim, Abdul, 269
 Hall, H. T., 214
 Holland, Thomas, 237
 Hallsworth, Joseph, 250, 280
 Haque, Fazlul, 359, 360, 362
 Hardy, George, 225
 Hargreave, 2
 Hasan, Samsuddin, 224
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 70
 Hertshon, Vernon, 286
 Hilton Young Currency Commission, 233
 Hind Mazdoor Panchayat, 434
 Hind Mazdoor Sabha, 435, 445, 446, 449, 453
 Hitler, 317
 Holy Roman Empire, 5
 Home, D. C., 107, 109, 110
 Home Rule For India League, 124
 Horniman, B. G., 165, 176, 188
 Hossain, Latafat, 303
 Huda, Samsul, 293
 Hume, Allen Octavian, 26
 Hussain, Liakat, 96
 Hutchinson Hugh Lester, 294, 295
 Imperial Order of the Guilds, 5
 Independent Labour Party of Great Britain, 281
 Indian Association, 64
 India and Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, 32
 Indian Factories Act of 1881, 49, 50, 77
 Indian Factory Act of 1922, 142
 Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908, 38, 39, 40, 49, 86, 99, 100, 115
 Indian Industrial Commission, 121
 Indian Labour Conference, 393, 441, 443, 445, 447
 Indian Labour Federation, 391, 392, 395, 435
 Indian Labour Party, 267

- Indian National Army, 394, 400
 Indian National Congress, foundation of, 26; background of the birth, 70, 72, 88, 90; division into two groups—moderates and extremists in 1907, 106; 113, 122, 123, 126, 140, 167, 170, 173, 174, 179, 194, 195, 221, 235, 250, 251, 254, 280, 286, 289, 290, 297, 298, 302, 312, 313, 321, 323, 325, 349, 351, 355, 357, 365, 372, 373, 374, 376, 388, 390, 392, 399, 400, 401, 401, 405, 408, 410, 411, 412, 413, 415, 434, 451
 Indian National Trade Union Congress, 367, 410, 411, 412, 434, 435, 445, 453
 Indian Penal Code of 1860, 47, 48, 60
 Indian Railway Act, 256
 Indian Reform Bill, 148
 Indian Seamen's Union, 391, 393
 Indian Steel Protection Bill, 232
 Indian Tea Association, 64
 Indian Telegraph Association, 404, 418, 422
 Indian Textile Tariff Board, 243
 Indian Trade Union Act of 1926, 232, 235, 237, 368
 Indian Trade Union Federation, 307, 308, 336, 342, 344, 345, 346, 347
 Industrial Revolution, 1, 2, 3, 16, 19
 International Congress of Revolutionary Trade and Industrial Unions, 201
 International Federation of Textile Workers' Association, London, 214
 International Federation of Trade Unions, Amsterdam, 185, 200, 201, 202, 214, 281, 287, 302, 308, 345
 International Labour Organization, 162, 163, 222, 302, 347, 397, 419, 437
 International Textile Tariff Board, 243
 International Transport Workers' Federation, Amsterdam, 248
 International Workingmen's Association, 13, 14
 Irish Labour Party, 283
 Irish Trade Union Congress, 174
 Irwin, Lord, 290
 Iyengar, Rangaswami, 210
 Jafarbhay, Abid Ali, 409
 Jallianwala Bagh, 124, 261
 Jinnah, Muhammad Ali, 166, 235, 299
 Joglekar, K. N., 245, 247, 249, 258, 262, 275, 283, 293, 339
 Johnstone, J. W., 282, 283, 299
 Joint Consultative Machinery, 422
 Joint Council of Action, 445, 449
 Joint Labour Board, 348
 Jones, Marvey, 280
 Josh, Sohan Singh, 199, 293
 Joshi, N. M., 48, 149, 162, 163, 170, 176, 210, 211, 214, 217, 222, 226, 227, 228, 237, 238, 243, 247, 250, 257, 260, 280, 281, 282, 284, 285, 286, 300, 301, 302, 303, 307, 308, 334, 335, 336, 342, 344, 345, 348, 391, 393, 394, 411, 427, 437
 Joshi, P. C., 293
 Joshi, S. M., 449
 Joshi, V. H., 310
 Kabadi, Sundar, 346
 Kadom, Lakshman Rao, 294
 Kalappa, V. R., 391, 392, 394, 427
 Kandalkar, G. L., 309, 310, 334, 346
 Kanji, Keshavlal, 112
 Kankinara Labour Union, 269
 Kanpur Labour Union, 269
 Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha, 361, 362
 Kara, Moniben, 334, 346, 352, 391
 Karnik, V. B., 346, 391
 Kasle, Gobinda Ramchandra, 294
 Kedernath, 280
 Khale, V. B., 339
 Khan, Abdul Rezzak, 269
 Khan, Aga, 125
 Khan, Amir Haidar, 294
 Khan, Hakim Ajmal, 126
 Khan, M. A., 216
 Khaparde, G. S., 94, 424
 Kher, B. G., 406
 Khilafat Movement, 125, 126
 Kirk, D., 283
 Kirti Kisan, 225
 Kirti Kisan Party, 199
 Kranti, 225
 Kripalani, J. B., 152, 409
 Kulkarni, D. B., 257, 283, 302, 310
 Kurbani, Fazal Ilahi, 394
 Labour, 423, 424
 Ladlow Jute Mill Workers' Union, 267
 Lahiri, Somnath, 339, 394
 Lahore Congress, 236, 320, 325
 Lakshman, P. P., 410
 Lall, Dewan Chaman, 40, 62, 68, 163, 166, 168, 170, 174, 176, 179, 189, 210, 224, 227, 228, 250, 257,

- 279, 280, 283, 286, 300, 301, 303,
307, 308, 342, 346, 404, 425, 426
Lansbury, George, 174
Laski, Prof. Harold, 295
Lassalleism, 12
League Against Imperialism and
Colonial Oppression, 203, 234,
282, 283, 299, 303
League of Nations, 162, 163, 419
Lenin, V. I., on Bombay Political
Strike, 108 ; 130, 143, 173, 185,
201, 224, 338
Levkovsky, A. I., 102
Liberal Federation, 235
Liberty, 343
Lohia, Dr. Ram Monohar, 409
Lokhunday, Narayan Maghaje, 73,
74, 75, 77, 78, 86, 146, 147
London Weekly, 215
London Workingmen's Association,
9
Lovett, William, 9
Lowell, Jones Russel, 11
Lozovsky, S. A., 202
- Mackenzie, Framji, 78
Madras Congress, boycott of Simon
Commission, 234
Madras Labour Union, 145, 146,
147, 165, 220
Madras Planters' Labour Act, 47
Madras Textile Workers' Union, 146
Majid, M. A., 293
Majumdar, Niharendu Dutta, 360
Majumdar, P. C., 73
Malavya, Madan Mohan, 279
Man, Tom, 225
Marx, Karl, 7, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16,
18, 22, 70, 169, 338, 458
Master and Servant's Act, 47
Masterman, J. C., 416
Maxwell, Reginald, 388
May-Day, 79
May Fourth Movement of China,
125
Mazdoor, 225
Mazzini, 13
McDonald, Ramsay, 323, 324
Meerut Conspiracy Case, 232, 245,
292, 295, 296, 299, 301, 323, 337,
339, 346
Meerut Defence Committee, 297
Mehta, Ashok, 409, 435
Mehta, Jamnadas, 342, 344, 345,
346, 370, 391, 397
Miller, J. B., 214, 220
Mirajkar, S. S., 284, 293, 339, 454
Mitra, Dinabandhu, 71
Mitra, J. N., 310, 345, 346
- Mitra, Kiron Chandra, 252, 253,
254, 289
Mitra Radharaman, 268, 293
Mahalanobis, P. C., 438
Mohani, Hasarat, 126
Mohsin-ul-Mulk, 123
Momin, Abdul, 269, 405
Montagu-Chelmsford Report, 173
Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of
1919, 156
Montagu declaration, 124
Mooney Trial, 295
Moppala Rebellion, 128
Moral Force Party, 9
Morley-Minto Reform, 122, 123
Morning Post, 172
Morrison, 100, 115
Moss, N. A., 80
M.S.M. & S.I. Railway, 368
Mountbatten, Lord Louis, 412
Mukherjee, Bankim, 267, 268, 269,
289, 304, 310, 339, 360, 370, 392,
405
Mukherjee, Dr. Biswanath, 280, 293,
296
Mukherjee, Rajani, 346
Mukherjee, Dr. R. K., 142
Mukherjee, Tarapada, 423, 424
- Naorojee, Dadabhai, 70, 90
Nagpur Congress, 128, 184, 221,
222
Nagpur Empress Mill, 79
Naidu, G. Ramanajulu, 146
Naidu, Sarojini, 186
Naidu, W. V. R., 246, 247, 249,
303
Namboodiripad, E. M. S., 453
Nanda, Gulzarilal, 332, 368, 409,
411, 441
Napoleon III, 12
Narayanswami, 256
Narayan, Jayaprokash, 375
Nare, B. R., 115
Nariman, K. F., 165
Narona, Dr., 404
National Association for the Protec-
tion of Labour, 8
National Federation of Indian Rail-
waymen, 449
National Federation of Labour, 345
National Federation of Post and
Telegraph Employees, 426, 445,
449
National Labour Commission, 447,
455, 456
National Minority Movement of
Great Britain, 283
National Trade Union Federation,
345, 346, 348, 352, 369, 370, 390

- National Whitley Council, 416, 424
 Nehru, Jawaharlal, 114, 223, 234, 235, 268, 283, 289, 297, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 311, 313, 323, 355, 356, 357, 360, 375, 392, 405, 406, 409, 412
 Nehru, Motilal, 129, 165, 195, 210, 213, 235, 297, 298, 299, 302
 Newhall Hill, 9
 Nil Darpan, 71
 Nimbkar, R. S., 167, 199, 289, 293
 North Western Railway, 193, 215, 220
 O'Brien, James Brontene, 11
 Ordinance of Labourers, 1349, 4
 Ottawa Trade Agreement, 326
 Ottoman Empire, 126
 Owen, Robert, 8, 9, 11
 Pakawasa, Mangaldas, 406
 Pal, Bipin Chandra, 94, 96, 97, 102, 114, 123, 428
 Pandhe, Dr. M. K., 457
 Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, 282
 Panth, Govind Vallabh, 361
 Parcell, Arther, 250, 280, 281
 Parulekar, S. V., 206, 370
 Pasha Mustafa Kamal, 125, 126
 Patel, G. I., 332
 Patel, Rajani, 429
 Patel, Sardar Vallabhbhai, 355, 367, 400, 409, 410
 Patel, Vithalbhai, 165, 290, 299
 Payment of Wages Act 1936, 335
 People's Charter, 9
 Permanent Settlement, 18
 Peterloo, 8
 Petrie, Sir David, 214, 215, 224, 227, 246
 Physical Force Party, 9
 Pillai, Krishnaswami, 256
 Plantation Act of 1870, 61
 Postal Club, 423
 Postman Lower Grade Staff Union, 404, 406, 425
 Prince of Wales, 128
 Prosad, Ajodhya, 294
 Prosad, Rai Sahib Chandrika, 279, 280, 427
 Prosad, Dr. Rajendra, 361
 Froudhonism, 12
 Public Safety Act, 232
 Public Safety Ordinance, 279
 Rai, Lala Lajpat, 90, 127, 129, 163, 165, 169, 170, 173, 174, 176, 185, 186, 221, 222, 239, 279, 286
 Rajadhyaksha, Justice, 425
 Ram, Jagjivan, 409
 Ramamurthy, P., 456, 457
 Ranadive, B. T., 264, 310, 339, 386, 457
 Rao, B. Shiva, 45, 146, 255, 290, 303, 308, 331, 336, 344, 348
 Red International of Trade Unions, Moscow, 185, 201, 225, 227, 287, 302
 Reform Bill, 8
 Representation of the Peoples' Act of 1867 and 1884, 12
 Revolutionary Socialist Party of India, 435
 Rolland, Romain, 295
 Round Table Conference, 300, 303, 308, 323, 324
 Rowlatt Committee, 12
 Royal Commission on Labour in Great Britain, 43, 75, 80
 Royal Commission on Labour in India 1931, 40, 48, 140, 151, 155, 207, 209, 238, 239, 240, 242, 245, 300, 301, 307, 312, 313, 326, 328, 336, 343, 356
 Roy, Dr. Bidhan Chandra, 247
 Roychoudhury, K. C., 220, 303
 Roy, M. N., 28, 224, 314, 346, 391, 392
 Roy, Monoranjan, 455
 Roy, Raja Rammohun, 29, 30, 41, 44
 Ruikar, R. S., 257, 310, 346, 348
 Russian Revolution, 71, 116, 123, 130, 132, 145, 156, 161, 170, 340
 Ryan, J. F., 282, 283
 Sacco-Vanzetti Trial, 295
 Sahasrabudhi, 211
 Saint-Simon, Claude H., 11
 Saklatwala, Shapurji, 174, 176, 188, 236, 247, 272, 279, 280, 283
 Salimulla, 123
 Samya, 248
 Sanjeebanee, 64
 Santanam, K., 424
 Sarabhai, Anusabai, 221
 Sardesai, S. G., 310, 339
 Sarkar, Mukundlal, 224, 228, 247, 248, 255, 256, 275, 310, 344, 346, 370, 427
 Scot, 283
 Seal, Pulin Behari, 228
 Sehgal Kedarnath, 294
 Seikh, Tayib, 346
 Sen, Kali, 269
 Sen, Surya, 321
 Sengupta, J. M., 67, 247, 270
 Servants of India Society, 307
 Sethi, G., 210, 283, 309
 Shankar, Gouri, 294

- Shastri, Hariharnath, 346, 347, 348, 362, 409
 Sheffield File Cutters, 7
 Shivaji, 105
 Silesian Weavers, 7
 Simon Commission, 196, 232, 235, 280, 286, 398, 302, 308, 323
 Singh, Bhagat, 313, 323
 Sin Fein Party, 125
 Sinha, Satyanarayan, 406
 Skidmore, Thomas, 11
 Socialist Party, 435
 Social Service League of Bombay, 116
 Socialist Unity Centre, 435
 Somprokash, 57, 63, 79
 South Indian Railway, 255
 South Indian Railway Board, Coimbatore, 219
 Southern Marhatta Railway, 330
 Soviet Russia, 172
 Spark, 225
 Spratt Phillips, 253, 268, 280, 283, 294, 295, 298
 Sramik, 225
 Sreeramulu, A., 429
 State Co-ordination Committee of the West Bengal Government Employees' Associations and Unions, 429
 State Railway Workshop Committee, 243, 245
 Sun-Yat-Sen, 283
 Surat Congress, 106
 Swadeshi Movement, 26, 27, 91, 107
 Swaraj Party, 223

 Tagore, Rabindranath, 360
 Tairsee, M. L., 175
 Talekerker, N. A., 115
 Tata, J. N., 43
 Tata, Ratan, 272
 Textile Factory Labour Committee of 1906, 38, 44, 99
 Thakersay, V. D., 110, 111
 Thengdi, D. B., 436
 Thengdi, D. R., 224, 226, 283, 293, 296
 Tilak, Balagangadhar, 90, 94, 95, 105, as leader of the extremists, 107; historical trial, 109, 110, 112, 113; religious appeal, 114; 123, 124, foundation of TUC, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 167, 168, 173
 Times, London, 95, 172, 402
 Times of India, 95, 97, 109, 111, 115, 142
 Topa, Pandit Monmohanlall, 360
 Trade Disputes Act, 232, 291, 334, 335, 342, 366
 Trade Union International of Public and Allied Employees, 446
 Trade Union Movement of Czechoslovakia, 453
 Treaty of Versailles, 125, 126, 161, 163, 217, 354, 419

 Union of Post and Telegraph Workers, 426
 United Nations Alliance, 373, 376, 392
 United Trade Union Congress, 435, 445, 446, 449
 Upadhyaya, B., 93
 Usmani, Shaikat, 198, 293

 Vanguard, 226, 228, 229
 Vanguard of the Indian Independence, 225
 Varadachariar, Justice Srinivas, 425
 Vietnam Confederation of Labour, 453
 Vincent Raven Committee, 243, 255
 Vincent, William, 179
 Viswamitra, 292
 Viswananda, Swami, 168, 186

 Wadia, B. P., 145, 146, 147, 148, 162, 165, 170, 176, 236
 Wadia, R. F., 44
 Watt, James, 2
 Wavell, Lord, 399
 Wedgewood, J. C., 169, 174
 Weitzling, Wilhelm, 11
 Wells, H. G., 295
 Whitley Committee, 157
 Whitley, J. H., 300
 Whitney, Eli, 3
 Wilson, 125
 Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 47, 60
 Workers' and Peasants' Party, 199, 253, 260, 286, 291, 324, 338
 Workers' Weekly, London, 215
 Workers' Welfare League of India in England, 166, 174, 176, 188, 215, 224, 236, 303
 World Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism, 203
 World Federation of Trade Unions, 395, 453
 World Trade Union Congress, 395
 World War I, 35, 71, 116, 118, 122, 123, 205, 354, 419, 423, 424, 427, 430
 World War II, 372, 382, 397, 425
 Writers' Building Association, 428
 Young Workers' League, 337, 338

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