

CENTRE OF INDIAN TRADE UNIONS

Second Conference, Cochin, 18-22 April 1973

WELCOME SPEECH

By M. M. CHERIYAN

Chairman, Reception Committee

SECOND CONFERENCE OF THE CENTRE OF INDIAN TRADE UNIONS

(Cochin, 18 April—22 April 1973)

Welcome Speech by M. M. Cheriyan
Chairman, Reception Committee

Comrade President, Fraternal Delegates from Vietnam, Comrades:
AS CHAIRMAN of the Reception Committee of this second conference of the CITU, it is my privilege and honour to extend to you all a most warm and cordial welcome. Representing over 12 lakh workers, the 4000 delegates and observers who have assembled here, are the most authentic inheritors of the finest traditions of the Indian working class movement. In Kerala, which has always been in the forefront of the democratic movement, you will find yourself both at home and honoured.

I think it is more than significant that this conference of representatives of the fighting Indian working class should be honoured by the presence of fraternal delegates from heroic Vietnam. To working people all over the world, Vietnam has come to symbolise - and rightly so - the exploited mankind's long quest for freedom and social justice. Vietnam is the firmest link that unites the world working class in the common struggle for a better tomorrow. To you, comrade fraternal delegates from Vietnam, may I extend, on behalf of all of us here, a most warm and heartfelt welcome to this conference. May I also take this opportunity to express our profound joy at the magnificent victory you have won in the long, hard and just struggle against US imperialist aggression, for freedom and for national independence. The victory which you have wrested from the most formidable and ruthless of all imperialisms is also our victory, the victory, in fact, of the entire world working class movement. You have shown us, dear comrades from Vietnam, how a small country and a numerically small people can bring to knee a country several times the size of your own, and with a military machine that is probably the largest and the most sophisticated that the world has known. It would be no exaggeration to say that if the rest of the oppressed world showed half the courage, determination and perseverance that you have shown in the fight against the

US imperialist aggressors, the day of their liberation would both be sooner and surer.

We do hope that the Paris agreement will at last bring peace to the embattled people of Vietnam and will unify the two wings under a genuine national government. And when that day dawns, the world will remember with ever greater gratitude the life and work of one of the greatest of all leaders of all time, the great Ho Chi Minh.

Comrades, we have named the venue of this conference as "Azhikodan Nagar" and the ground where the mass rally will be held on the concluding day of conference as "C. H. Kanaran Nagar". I am sure that these two great leaders of the communist movement in Kerala are well known to you; not so well known, perhaps, is the fact that both of them rose to the leadership of the movement from the ranks of workers. We lost both these comrades suddenly and at a time when we needed their guidance as never before. Comrade Azhikodan was brutally murdered last September by members of an anti-social group calling themselves as "communist revolutionaries"; hardly three months later, Com. Kanaran, who was secretary of the Kerala State unit of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), died of illness that a life without rest and without even the minimum comforts had given him. These two comrades were examples of selfless dedication to the cause of the working class. Their death, one following the other, was a serious blow to the working class movement in Kerala. As we meet here today, we miss them very much: we miss their brilliant organisational abilities, their wisdom and their leadership. The best tribute we can pay to their memory is to rededicate ourselves with greater determination and selflessness to the cause for which they worked all their life tirelessly and steadfastly.

Comrades, Kerala is indeed proud to host this historic conference. As a result of years of hard and dedicated work, we have in Kerala one of the strongest units of the CITU. I do not propose to give you a picture of the state of the organised working class movement in this state; that job, I am sure, will be more competently done by the delegates from Kerala, many of whom are seasoned fighters and leaders. But I may be permitted to mention here that the fears entertained by many of us at the time when we parted company with the revisionist leadership of the AITUC have

proved baseless. It was feared, for instance, that the expulsion of the revisionists from the leadership of the militant unions in the State would cause a serious division in the ranks of the working class in the State. But as subsequent events proved so convincingly, the overwhelming bulk of the workers not only approved but, in fact, rejoiced at the expulsion of the revisionists from the leadership of their unions. Indeed, in many a case, the initiative for cleansing the unions of the revisionists came from the ranks of the workers themselves.

Experience has shown that the formation of the CITU has only strengthened the fighting capacity of the workers. For the traditional industries of Kerala—coir, cashew, handloom and plantation—which employ lakhs of workers, the emergence of the CITU proved to be the best break in several years. The leadership of the INTUC and the AITUC had sedulously discouraged all wage demands in these industries on the specious plea that such demands would only hasten the ruin of these industries which, they alleged, were already on the verge of collapse. They rebuffed our attempts at united struggles in these industries, but slowly—and largely as a result of mounting pressure from their own ranks—they had to, willy-nilly, fall in line with the CITU for united struggles. As a result, workers in these industries have won not insubstantial wage increases, and they have come to look upon the CITU not only as a militant organisation, but as an organisation they can trust.

I have no doubt that you have all heard about the recent strike action of the teachers and the State government employees of Kerala, who together number about 3 lakhs. It was a remarkable battle that went on for fifty five days. It tore the mask off the so-called communist Chief Minister of this State—yes, believe me, this man still has the audacity to call himself “Communist”,—and showed him as the most despicable capitalist employer. The tactics his government employed to break up the strike are such as would shame even the worst capitalist exploiter: terror, repression, mass arrests, frame-ups, dismissals, suspension, black-legging, bluff and black mail. In addition to the Internal Security Act, the government issued an Essential Services Ordinance. Under cover of the Ordinance, strikes by certain sections of the employees were declared illegal. Company unions were propped

up and encouraged to undertake massive blacklegging. Government tactics, however, only helped to steel the will of the NGOs and the teachers and forge their unity ever stronger. The entire progressive democratic movement in Kerala rose in support of the striking employees. The CITU called a one-day token general strike in solidarity with the striking employees which was a resounding success. But the government was unmoved and it reiterated its refusal to talk to the employees unless they called off the strike. It was then that the opposition parties, together with the CITU and independent labour unions, called for a Kerala Bandh. The Bandh which took place on 21st February was a complete success. Nothing moved in Kerala that day and the message was clear to all not excluding the government. Chief Minister Achutha Menon called in the union leaders for talks. The talks failed because of the refusal of the government to concede the main demand: appointment of a pay commission and payment of interim relief. On the 55th day, the strike was called off, and the employees went back to their offices, undefeated and with a new pride in the power of their organisation. It was, in a sense, a historic struggle.

I have referred to the strike action of the State government employees in some detail as it would demonstrate, I felt, the thoroughly reactionary, anti-worker attitude of the present Kerala government. Police interference in workers' struggles, on behalf of the employers, is commonplace in Kerala. Arrests, lathi charges, and lock-up beatings and tortures of militant TU cadres are the rule, not the exception. Hundreds and thousands of militant cadres from the fields and factories have been maimed and mutilated since the Menon regime had come into being. Thanks to the leadership of the CITU, not only have the workers fought back the vicious attacks of this government, but they have also made important gains in the last three years:

Comrades, I am sure, we will have similar reports to hear from other states, too, where the CITU has come to occupy an important position in the organised working class movement. We shall in particular be benefitted by the experience of the comrades from West Bengal who have, over the last three years, faced and successfully fought back the most brutal repression ever unleashed in any part of the country. The West Bengal comrades, more

than any other, have seen the real face of Indira socialism. There, in an unprecedented campaign of terror and plain goondaism, the followers of the Indira Congress, with the full backing of the police and the CRP, sought to forcibly capture the unions controlled by the CITU. Hundreds of active cadres of the CITU and even some leaders were murdered by these anti-social elements. But the workers fought back and the CITU was not only able to retain its hold over the unions, but also expand its influence in this period. We feel proud of the fact that in the campaign to fight back the Congress-police terror in West Bengal, the Kerala working class, too, had played its modest role. On May 16, 1972, in response to the call of the State unit of the CITU, bulk of the organised working class in Kerala observed a one-day token strike in solidarity with their fighting comrades in West Bengal.

An assessment of the experience of the various State units of the CITU, of the struggles and actions conducted by them since the formation of the organisation in May 1970 will, I am sure, vindicate the correctness of the decision we took at that time to part company with the revisionist leadership of the AITUC. In the three years since its formation, the CITU has established the fact that it alone is the true inheritor of the militant traditions of the Indian working class.

Comrades, we are meeting at a time when the magic of the Indira wave has ceased to mesmerise anyone who can think for himself. The big bluff of "Garibi Hatao" has boomeranged on its author. The illusions created at the time of the Congress split have begun to dissolve in the bitter realities of life. Runaway prices, rising unemployment, drought and semi-famine conditions in major parts of the country have made shambles of Mrs. Gandhi's socialist paradise. In an unusual display of honesty she admitted, a few days ago, that she doesn't believe that poverty can be abolished in her lifetime. She might well have added that as the patron and protector of the interests of the monopolists and the big landlords, it was not her job to abolish poverty; for, as we know, the policies of her government can only increase the area of poverty.

It is perhaps our good luck that the Report of the Third Pay Commission should have come precisely at this moment. The middle classes, which appeared to entertain illusions about the

socialist pretensions of Indira Gandhi at the time of the 1972 elections, now seem shocked and badly let down. Such crass bias as this commission has shown for the upper crust of the bureaucracy at the expense of the Class III and IV employees of the Government have even shocked members of the ruling Congress. The Commission Report, in short, has helped to convince the hitherto anti-struggle leaders and ranks of the Central Government employees that the only language that their employer—i.e. the Government—understands is the language of struggle. And indeed that seems about the only way to deal with the increasingly authoritarian and anti-working class government of Indira Gandhi.

It does'nt need a prophet to see that the period ahead will be a period of major struggles. These struggles will encompass sections which had hitherto kept away from such struggles. The dimension of the present economic crisis and government's policies to meet it—inflation, wage freeze, strike bans, cutbacks on development schemes, among others—will throw thousands upon thousands on the streets, with no option other than resort to battle. In meeting such a situation, the government will have no qualms about the methods it is certain to adopt: it will be more of the same—dismissals, arrests and shootings. I am confident that this session of the CITU will help gear up the organisation to meet the continuing offensive of the government.

Now, in conclusion, allow me to extend the most warm and cordial welcome to all of you delegates who have travelled from distant parts of the country to attend this session. I would like to assure them that it shall be the endeavour of the Reception Committee and the delegates from Kerala to make their stay here as comfortable as we possibly can. But we know the task we have undertaken is immense as against our resources which unfortunately are limited. Yet we shall do our very best to fulfil our obligations as the host of this conference.

Dear Comrades, once again I welcome you all on behalf of the Reception Committee and wish your deliberations all success. Let this second conference of the CITU come to be recorded as a landmark in the history of the Indian working class movement.

LONG LIVE CITU!

LONG LIVE WORKING CLASS UNITY!