



TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP OF THE PREWAR PERIOD IN THE MADRAS PRESIDENCY

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ABSTRACT

Industry by reason of its very productive system provides a majority of workers employed within the industry with increasingly common experiences for collective action. The first recorded strike in Madras was in the Buckingham Mills on 26 June 1878 with a few months of its starting (**Eamon D, Murphy, Unions in conflict**).

KEYWORDS: productive system , Buckingham Mills.

INTRODUCTION

The Mill hands demanded that the mills should not be deputed elsewhere. But the management broke the strike by importing black legs from Bombay and by dismissing the ringleaders of the strike. Strikes became common in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. M/s. Binny and Co submitted to the British Royal Commission on Labour of 1882 that strikes and lock out occurred at intervals generally of two years. The manager of South India spinning and weaving Mills Co, Royapuram also stated that five strikes each lasting three to four days took place in the period 1881-1980. Harveys of the Madura mills at Madura admitted before the same commission that there was occasional friction between the employees and employers, but not a stoppage of work. Stanes, the managing Agent of the Coimbatore Spinning and Weaving mills stated that on 10 May 1891, 300 of 350 workers struck as a protest against the assault of a worker by a supervisor.

But a very significant strike was in the Government Press, Madras in January 1904. The workers in the Government press protested against the introduction of task work system under which the press workers and the machine man should work between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. without overtime pay to compensate of the lower out turn during the normal working hours. The new system, while promising incentives for some workers, seemed to impinge on workers' leisure. But regardless of incentive package in the new task work system, all workers struck on 2 January 1904. The strike dragged on till August 1904, when the workers returned to work under the new task work system. (D. Narasimha Reddy, "Growth and structure of unions in southern Railway"), Railways, too, recorded a number of strikes by their workers. The first recorded strike in the Perambur Workshop, a wing of the then Madras Railway Company with over 3,000 workers took place in May 1898 when the company decided to reduce the working hours. In 1905 there was also a sit down strike for increase in wages.

The Madras Railway had merged with the Southern Maratha Railway to form the Madras and Southern Maratha Railway in 1908. This brought in a new kind of solidarity among the workers. Anglo-

Indian workers under the Amalgamated society of Railway servants in India went on strike. The Indian staff in the MLSM Railway joined them. The strike, which began on 3rd June, ended two days later. Soon after, the management was determined to bring under its control the whole workforce with new set of service conditions. In November 1913 the workmen of the carriage building refused to accept the new conditions. Hence the management decided to discharge forty-three of the workers with less than a year's service for their refusal to sign. But a lightning strike on 28 November 1913 by 700 workers against the notice of discharge led to its cancellation.

Before this dispute over the new service agreement died down, the management issued an order on 13 November 1913 changing the timing of the opening of the office from 6.30 a.m to 6.45 a.m. and 12 –15 in the afternoon. The new timing caused much hardship to the workers in the carriage building, as they had difficulty in passing through the gang way in allotted five minutes, On 18 December 1913, a number of carpenters were mulcted in their wages for coming late the next day a notice was put up in their shop not to return to work at the prescribed time after the lunch break. Accordingly after the lunch break on 19 December 1913 workers in the carriage building shop en bloc did not place their tickets in the late box to prove the insufficiency of the time allowed to them to reach the shop. By 2.30 p.m. the news spread that all of them were to be fined half an hour's pay. A riot broke out. The assistant foreman and the works manager came to pacify them, but they were assaulted (**R.N. Sampath and Pe.Su. Mani, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai**).

The crowd chased the European officers into the Works Manager's office room. The European officers opened fire killing one on the spot and injuring a few others. One of them died later. The police was called in and dispersed the crowd. The workshop was closed the next day and was reopened only on 2 January 1914. The police and the District magistrate justified the shooting by the European officers as an act of self-defense. The Indian patriot and the Hindu demanded public enquiry. The Governor in council opined that the officers who fired on the rioters did so justifiably in defense of life and property.

After 1905, following the agitation against the partition of Bengal, politics of Tamil Nadu underwent a sea change. Tuticorin, a port town in Tirunelvely district, became the nucleus of working class struggle. The workers of the English owned coral mills in that port town struck on 27 February 1908, demanding rise in wages. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramaniya Siva, new converts to extremist ideology of Balagangadar Tilak, provided a strong leadership to the strikers' public sympathy swelled for the strikers as the management declared a lock-out. Funds were collected to help feed the strikers. The management adopted various coercive methods like intimidation to break the unity of the workers, but in vain.

Finally the management called in V.O. Chidambaram Pillai to act as negotiator to settle the strike, as per the settlement, the management agreed to give fifty percent increase in wages, reduce the working hours and declare Sunday a holiday. The strike ended on 7 March 1908.

This was a remarkable victory for the workers and the nationalists. But the colonial state waited for an opportunity to punish the leaders who led the workers. An occasion organized to celebrate the release of Bipan Chandra pal, a Bengali journalist and leading nationalist provided an opportunity to the colonial state to present V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, Subramaniya Siva and Padmanabha Ayyar from addressing the meeting by prohibitory orders. The nationalists defied those orders and addressed the meeting. On 12 March 1908 the three were asked to appear before the District Magistrate under Section 107 of the Criminal Procedure Code (R.N. Sampath and Pe.Su. Mani). By that section, a person might be called upon to show cause why he should not be ordered to execute a bond for keeping the peace for a period not exceeding one year or under sub section 4 of the section a magistrate might exercise discretion to detain such person in custody until the completion of the enquiry. It was under the latter provision presumably that the magistrate of Tinnelvely acted in committing Chidambaram Pillai and two others to prison.

In protest, a hartal was observed in Tinnelvely district the following day. The protesters attacked the buildings and damaged them. A Bastille like situation was enacted. Jail gates were broken open and prisoners were allowed to flee. The District Collector, Winch, rushed to the scene of disturbances with a huge battalion of police and ordered firing to quell the 'riots'. Four were killed, three Hindus, including one Adi-dravida and one Muslim. Tuticorin town witnessed a different kind of political development. The workers of the coral mills, Best and company, Burmah Oil Company, the butchers and dust collectors stopped work in protest against the arrest of the leaders. The strike of the coral mill workers lasted for six days from 14 March to 19 March 1908 and was undoubtedly a first political strike against the imprisonment of the nationalist leaders in colonial India. The six-day strike of the Bombay mill workers against the arrest of Balagangadar Tilak came four months later, i.e. July 1908. (Eamon D, Murphy, *Unions in conflict*).

But the prize the workers paid for their political action was too costly. The workers in the coral mills were allowed to resume work on 20 March 1908 on the existing pay and not on the increased pay announced on 7 March 1908. But this did not snap the link between the workers and the nationalist leaders. Though the extremist nationalists did not organize workers into trade union organizations, they recognized strike as an effective weapon in their struggle against the employers. But the idea of trade unions as workers' organizations for collective bargaining with employers developed only in the post – war period.

The Outsiders in Labour Leadership: It is no accident that the relatively under-developed Madras city saw the launching of the first formally organized union in India, the Madras Labour Union on 27 April 1918. Though Madras was industrially under-developed and had a small workforce, disproportionate to the total population of the city, the conditions under which the workers laboured and lived were quite conducive to the origins of a labour movement. There were few big industrial establishments, and the great concentration of workers developed only in the B and C Mills, the Burma Oil Company, the tramways, the Electric Supply Corporation all of whom, apart from the Madras Port, were owned and managed by Europeans who were bound by their common racial and economic interests (**M. Lakshmanan, *Labour Movement in Madras City.1918-39***). These establishments allowed no space for their employees to articulate their grievances through organized effort. Penalties were imposed on those who came under the influence of trade unions; seizure of a gratuity fund, beating and sometimes branding certain individuals with an iron rod, were all part of the punishments meted out to workers by managers. Added to all this was the existence of low wages and bad working conditions in the establishments. These conditions further deteriorated in the period following the First World War. What was required at this time was only an organized effort; the Madras Labour Union (MLU) was the result of the effort by nationalists and Home Rulers, with the active cooperation of the workers (**C. Ramachandran and T. Thankappan, "Working Class Protest in Pre-War Madras Presidency**).

The rise and spread of the Home Rule Movement was significant in that it reached a hitherto untouched segment of the population, the workers. In Madras city it drew support not only from the middle and lower classes but also from the labouring class. Various sections of the latter, including even government employees, looked to the political leadership for ways of overcoming their problems. Fortunately for the working class of Madras, the Home rulers based at Adayar in Madras were able to articulate their grievances. Prominent among them was Annie Besant. Annie Basant had a long record of radical politics and agitation, being associated with the National Secular Society in London. One labour historian also argues that she was associated with the historic Match Girls Strike of Bryant & Mary's, which was the forerunner of the General Union in London in the 1880 (**Henry Pelling. *The Origins of the Labour Party***).

She carried the same radical politics to Madras. Because of her role in the Home Rule agitation and her subsequent arrest, she became a popular leader among the people in the metropolitan cities.

For before formal attempts were made to unionize workers, there were sporadic strikes, which indicate the presence of a “strike consciousness. Unions and associations were new institutions, the economic advantages of which the workers generally were unaware, in most cases due to their illiteracy and low economic and social background; there were certain instances of the workers’ resistance to the formation of unions for their own advantage, for fear of victimization. Even in the B and C Mills where a workforce of about 10,000 employees was concentrated, there was little “union consciousness” among them, although there were cases of workers coming out on strike spontaneously, fighting against low wages and bad working condition.

Thiru. Vi. Kalayana Sundara Mudaliar(Thiru. Vi.Ka), a prominent Tamil scholar, exhorted the workers to form an association to better their prospects and improve their conditions. When labour meetings were held under the guise of a religious body - *Shri Venkatesa Gunarutha Varshani Sabha* - the attitude of the bureaucrats was “to watch events”. It meant in practice to demonstrate the strength of the employer vis-a-vis the workers. One official’s view is: “No cause for anxiety... when the mill owners [of the B and C Mills] forbid their hands to become members of a discreditable sabha, it is pretty clear that they have the bulk of their operatives at their back and have no compunction about kicking out the malcontents.” This kind of languages reflects the overall attitude of the colonial bureaucracy on the state of labour discontent in Madras city, and also reveals the confidence they reposed in the European management to tackle the labour situation (**Home Poll. Part I, File No.93/1/1921, NAI**).

The non-trade union leaders evinced interest in the sphere of labour and wrote special leaders on the poor conditions of workers’ lives. S. Kesava Pillai, a former member of the Legislative Council and the President of the Madras Presidency Association, under whose aegis meetings of labourers had been held in the past, mentioned in a lead article that there existed “the hard conditions under which mill hands [of B and C Mills] are made to work without adequate compensation in these days of scarcity, while mill owners are making enormous profits”, and stressed the need for action and “combined work”, apparently suggesting the union of political and labour leadership (**Home Poll. Dept. (Deposit) Progs, File No.29, March 1919, NAI**).

The Home Rule Press and the Home Rulers in Madras saw labour as a significant force to be a part of the political movement. In this period of political tumult, the Home Rule Movement and the labour awakening became intertwined. Wadia acknowledged the potential power of the working class to become an integral part of the national movement. He observed that it was necessary to recognize the labour movement as an integral part of the national movement. The latter will not succeed in the right direction of democracy if the Indian working class is not enabled to organize their force and come into their own. Nevertheless, the role of the working class as an integral part of the national movement began only when two philanthropic members of a religious body, G. Ramanujulu Naidu and G. Chellvapathy Chetty, approached the Home Rule publicist, Wadia, to enlist his support in the work of organizing the workers of the B and C Mills. The immediate interests of the workers were kept in the forefront: thus at the meeting held on 27 April 1918, when the MLU was founded, the main objective of the union was stated to be “to improve the moral and social condition of not only the members who join the union, but also of the labourers of Madras.” Wadia realized the importance of workers union mainly for their welfare; and he aimed to establish an office and a reading room in the labour quarter of Perambur (**B.P. Wadia, New India of 20 November 1918**).

In this connection a comparison between the Gandhian concept of workers’ organizations and that of theosophists could be quite useful. While Gandhi incorporated the concept of right to strike in a limited sense in his techniques of mass mobilization and sanctioned it as an ultimate bargaining weapon with the employer, he always prepared an arbitration method to settle differences between capital and labour. While this Gandhian technique won the consent of the Ahmedabad mill workers, the mill owners saw in it two advantages: acceptance of the arbitration method, by its own logic, de-classed the

organization of workers; and helped mill owners to retain an edge over the foreign mill owners in times of open confrontation between the nationalist movement and the colonial state. While this was, to some extent, successful in Ahmedabad, in Madras the theosophists had to encounter the European class who were well entrenched in industry and who rejected outright an outsider's role or government's intervention in industrial relations. Hence the theosophists' vision of labour organization never went beyond collective bargaining between capital and labour, with government acting as a mediator.

Nevertheless the immediate reaction of the bureaucracy towards even the limited vision of Wadia was hostile: the government considered him "the most dangerous worker in the direction of awakening of labour". But for Wadia, the formation of a labour association was an essential part of the workers' welfare programme as conceived by him. There were other nationalists, too, who expressed or held similar views on the importance of labour welfare and mobilization in this period; notable among them were V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, Harisharvathama Rao, leading participants in the Swadeshi Movement in Tamil Nadu, Chellvapathy Chetty, Thiru. Vi. Ka., and others.

In opposition to the attempt of the Home Rulers and even before the formation of the MLU, a special meeting was held on 5 April 1918 to establish a union called South Indian Labour Party, accepting the creed of the South Indian Liberal Federation. But this attempt, motivated more or less by the communal bias of the South Indian Labour Party in weaning away the working class from the nationalist mainstream, did not materialize. Its subtle backdoor intervention in the 1921 mill strike, however, proved disastrous to the unity of the workers.

The formation of the MLU was not without opposition, particularly from the bureaucracy and European capitalists. Ever since its formation it was faced with a barrage of charges pertaining to outsiders' interference, political motives and selfish interests. Unions became the focus of labour disputes, and every conflict between capital and labour brought in its wake questions of union recognition and outsiders' leadership. It is around these that the resolution of every conflict centered. In the process the managements exerted heavy pressure on workers, and attempted and employed all means of coercion to combat and defeat their solidarity.

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