

The Movement of the Working Class

The beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century heralded the entry of modern industry into India. The thousands of hands employed in construction of railways were harbingers of the modern Indian working class. Further industrialisation came with the development of ancillary industries along with the railways. The coal industry developed fast and employed a large working force. Then came the cotton and the jute industries.

The Indian working class suffered from the same kind of exploitation witnessed during the industrialisation of Europe and the rest of the West, such as low wages, long working hours, unhygienic and hazardous working conditions, employment of child labour and the absence of basic amenities. The presence of colonialism in India gave a distinctive touch to the Indian working class movement. The Indian working class had to face two basic antagonistic forces—an imperialist political rule and economic exploitation at the hands of both foreign and native capitalist classes. Under the circumstances, inevitably, the Indian working class movement became intertwined with the political struggle for national emancipation.

Early Efforts

The early nationalists, especially the Moderates,

- were indifferent to the labour's cause;
- differentiated between the labour in the Indian-owned factories and those in the British-owned factories;
- believed that labour legislations would affect the competitive edge enjoyed by the Indian-owned industries;
- did not want a division in the movement on the basis of classes;
- did not support the Factory Acts of 1881 and 1891 for these reasons.

Thus, earlier attempts to improve the economic conditions of the workers were in the nature of the philanthropic efforts which were isolated, sporadic and aimed at specific local grievances.

1870 Sasipada Banerjea started a workingmen's club and newspaper *Bharat Shramjeevi*.

1878 Sorabjee Shapoorji Bengalee tried to get a bill, providing better working conditions to labour, passed in the Bombay Legislative Council.

1880 Narain Meghajee Lokhanday started the newspaper *Deenbandhu* and set up the Bombay Mill and Millhands Association.

1899 The first strike by the Great Indian Peninsular Railways took place, and it got widespread support. Tilak's *Kesari* and *Maharatta* had been campaigning for the strike for months.

There were many prominent nationalist leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal and G. Subramanya Aiyar who demanded better conditions for workers and other pro-labour reforms.

During Swadeshi Upsurge

Workers participated in wider political issues. Strikes were organised by Ashwini Coomar Banerjea, Prabhat Kumar Roy

Chaudhuri, Premtosh Bose and Apurba Kumar Ghosh. These strikes were organised in government press, railways and the jute industry.

There were attempts to form trade unions but these were not very successful.

Subramaniya Siva and Chidambaram Pillai led strikes in Tuticorin and Tirunelveli and were arrested.

The biggest strike of the period was organised after Tilak's arrest and trial.

During the First World War and After

The War and its aftermath brought a rise in exports, soaring prices, massive profiteering opportunities for the industrialists but very low wages for the workers. This led to discontent among workers.

The emergence of Gandhi led to a broad-based national movement and the emphasis was placed on the mobilisation of the workers and peasants for the national cause.

A need was felt for the organisation of the workers in trade unions.

International events like the establishment of a socialist republic in the Soviet Union, formation of the Comintern and setting up of International Labour Organisation (ILO) lent a new dimension to the movement of the working class in India.

■ The AITUC

The All India Trade Union Congress was founded on October 31, 1920. The Indian National Congress president for the year, Lala Lajpat Rai, was elected as the first president of AITUC and Dewan Chaman Lal as the first general secretary. Lajpat Rai was the first to link capitalism with imperialism—"imperialism and militarism are the twin children of capitalism".

The prominent Congress and swarajist leader C.R. Das presided over the third and the fourth sessions of the AITUC. The Gaya session of the Congress (1922) welcomed the

formation of the AITUC and a committee was formed to assist it. C.R. Das advocated that the Congress should take up the workers' and peasants' cause and incorporate them in the struggle for swaraj or else they would get isolated from the movement. Other leaders who kept close contacts with the AITUC included Nehru, Subhas Bose, C.F. Andrews, J.M. Sengupta, Satyamurthy, V.V. Giri and Sarojini Naidu. In the beginning, the AITUC was influenced by social democratic ideas of the British Labour Party. The Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, trusteeship and class-collaboration had great influence on the movement. Gandhi helped organise the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association (1918) and through a protest secured a 27.5 per cent wage hike. (Later, the arbitrator's award ensured a 35 per cent raise.)

■ The Trade Union Act, 1926

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- recognised trade unions as legal associations;
- laid down conditions for registration and regulation of trade union activities;
- secured immunity, both civil and criminal, for trade unions from prosecution for legitimate activities, but put some restrictions on their political activities.

■ Late 1920s

A strong communist influence on the movement lent a militant and revolutionary content to it. In 1928 there was a six-month-long strike in Bombay Textile Mills led by the Girni Kamgar Union. The whole of 1928 witnessed unprecedented industrial unrest. This period also saw the crystallisation of various communist groups, with leaders like S.A. Dange, Muzaffar Ahmed, P.C. Joshi, Sohan Singh Joshi etc.

Alarmed at the increasing strength of the trade union movement under extremist influence, the government resorted to legislative restrictions. It passed the Public Safety Ordinance (1929) and the Trade Disputes Act (TDA), 1929. The TDA, 1929

- made compulsory the appointment of Courts of Inquiry and Consultation Boards for settling industrial disputes;
- made illegal the strikes in public utility services like posts, railways, water and electricity, unless each individual worker planning to go on strike gave an advance notice of one month to the administration;
- forbade trade union activity of coercive or purely political nature and even sympathetic strikes.

■ **Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929)**

In March 1929, the Government arrested 31 labour leaders, and the three-and-a-half-year trial resulted in the conviction of Muzaffar Ahmed, S.A. Dange, Joglekar, Philip Spratt, Ben Bradley, Shaukat Usmani and others. The trial got worldwide publicity but weakened the working class movement.

The workers participated during 1930 in the Civil Disobedience Movement but after 1931 there was a dip in the working class movement because of a split in 1931 in which the corporatist trend led by N.M. Joshi broke away from the AITUC to set up the All India Trade Union Federation. In 1935, the communists rejoined the AITUC. Now, the left front consisted of the communists, Congress socialists and the leftist nationalists like Nehru and Subhas.

■ **Under Congress Ministries**

During the 1937 elections, the AITUC had supported the Congress candidates. The Congress governments in provinces gave a fillip to the trade union activity. The Congress ministries were generally sympathetic to the workers' demands. Many legislations favourable to the workers were passed.

During and After the Second World War

Initially, the workers opposed the War but after 1941 when Russia joined the war on behalf of the Allies, the communists

described the war as a “peoples’ war” and supported it. The communists dissociated themselves from the Quit India Movement. A policy of industrial peace was advocated by the communists.

In the period 1945 to 1947, workers participated actively in the post-War national upsurges. In 1945, the dock workers of Bombay and Calcutta refused to load ships taking supplies to the warring troops in Indonesia. During 1946, the workers went on a strike in support of the Naval Ratings. During the last year of foreign rule, there were strikes by workers of posts, railways and many other establishments.

After Independence

The working class movement got polarised on the basis of political ideologies.