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The lockout in the cotton mills of Bombay ended in the beginning of December. The workers resisted the attack on wages for ten weeks. About 160,000 workers, including 30,000 women and 12,000 children, were involved in the struggle. The lockout was called off by the employers after the excise duty was abolished.

Cotton textile industry is the oldest Indian industry owned almost exclusively by native capital. The first cotton mill (power-driven) was built in 1875. Since then the industry has grown steadily in spite of the competition of Lancashire backed by the entire political resources of British imperialism. Over 30 per cent of the British export trade with India being in cotton goods, imperialist policy naturally was to obstruct the development in India of cotton spinning and weaving with the application of mechanical power. Every time revenue purposes obliged the British government of India to impose duty on the cotton goods imported, there rose an indignant protest from the textile magnates of Manchester. Finally, in the beginning of the present century, a 5 per cent import duty was agreed upon provided that a countervailing excise duty at the similar rate was levied upon the cotton textiles manufactured in the Indian mills. To demand the abolition of the excise duty on the cotton industry has since been an article of faith of Indian nationalism. After a few years it was reduced to 3.5 per cent.

The situation suddenly changed in consequence of the imperialist war. Britain found herself in a position where it was impossible for her to supply the Indian market. Japan was not slow to take advantage of that opportunity and invade what had so far been an English monopoly. To encourage the production of the Indian mills was the only means of keeping Japan out. There was another consideration—to secure the loyalty of the Indian bourgeoisie, the British government of India abandoned the policy of free

trade and increased the duty on imported cotton goods to 8 per cent. This economic concession was made to the Indian bourgeoisie in return for the latter's undertaking to help the raising of war loan of £100 million. The trade depression and the resulting budget deficit in the year following the postwar boom obliged the government of India to increase the import duty to 11 per cent. All this time the 3.5 per cent excise duty, however, remained in operation.

In the postwar boom period the Indian cotton industry became fabulously prosperous. Everything was favourable to it. Labour was as cheap as dirt and totally unorganised; the mills were built in cities surrounded by rich cotton belts; the market was equally near; and there was an effective tariff against foreign competition. The total capital of the mills in and around the city of Bombay is in round numbers 20,000,000 rupees (a rupee is equivalent to 33 cents approximately). The net profit derived from these mills in the years 1918-22 was 360,000,000 rupees. In that period of prosperity the wages rose slightly over 100 per cent in comparison with the prewar rate, while the rise in prices and rent was an average of 154 per cent.

Such an abnormal boom could not continue. Depression set in by the end of 1922. The year following showed a decline in the rate of profit. Wages were attacked and a 20 per cent reduction was forced in the spring of 1924. The workers resisted the capitalist offensive by declaring a general strike which lasted nearly three months. In the period of prosperity, instead of an increase in the wages, the employers had granted a yearly bonus of a month's wage. The payment of the bonus was discontinued towards the end of 1924. This meant practically another 8 per cent reduction of the wages. In June 1925 the owners declared their intention of closing down the mills unless the workers agreed to accept a further 20 per cent wage-cut. The owners were divided on the issue. Finally the demanded cut was reduced to 11.5 per cent. The enforcement of this last cut would reduce the wage almost to the prewar level while the prices remained over 100 per cent higher.

The capitalist cry was that the industry was ruined, because owing to the excise duty it could not compete with Japanese and English goods. Even in 1924 more than half the mills of Bombay paid 10 to 15 per cent dividend although all the mills taken together showed a total annual loss of 28,000,000 rupees. The saving on the wage bill in consequence of the projected 11.5 per cent cut would be equivalent to the amount paid in the excise duty. By their determination to lock out the 176,000 workers employed in the Bombay mills, the owners enlisted the support of the entire nationalist movement to the demand for immediate removal of the excise duty. The labour leaders (all humanitarian reformists and nationalist politicians) also supported the demand of Indian capital against British capital. They agreed with the employers that the industry was on the verge of ruin and that the inequitable impost should be abolished. They also endeavoured to induce the workers to understand the critical situation of the industry. But the capitalist attack was too barefaced. The workers refused to work on the reduced wages and 80 out of 82 mills of Bombay were closed in the middle of September throwing out in the streets 156,000 workers.

The Bombay lockout proved to be a landmark in the history of the Indian labour movement. For ten weeks over 150,000 workers stood as a man in their resistance, without a union fund to back them and without a revolutionary class leadership to guide them. In this bitter struggle they developed proletarian leadership. From the very beginning a strike committee composed mostly of workers came into existence and led the struggle to the end. The bourgeois "labour leaders" who had exercised such a pernicious influence over previous strikes and lockouts were obliged to remain in the background, requesting the imperialist government to intervene in favour of the workers, persuading the millowners to be kinder and administering relief with the help of the financial aid received from abroad. For the first time Indian workers were practically supported in their struggle by

the European labour organisation. This factor had a tremendous moral effect on the situation. Finally the workers won. In the beginning of December the mills were reopened and the workers resumed work at the old rate of wages. The employers abandoned their attack on wages because of the abolition of the excise duty.

The most important outcome of the Bombay lockout, however, was the organisation of the Union of Textile Workers. The textile workers of Bombay had been practically unorganised. The union existed only in name. A group of humanitarian intellectuals headed by N. M. Joshi functioned as the union, doing some insignificant welfare work and carrying on negotiations with the government and the millowners when occasion arose. The capital of the Bombay cotton industry being predominantly Indian, the nationalistically inclined humanitarian "labour leaders" did not think it prudent to push the work of organisation. The new union has grown out of the struggle with a purely proletarian character and with a class leadership. The 1924 strike was sabotaged by the bourgeois humanitarian leaders. Towards the end it was continued under the leadership of a number of workers. These proletarian leaders were dismissed soon after the strike was over. They organised into a club which functioned as a nucleus of propaganda. It gradually gathered around it the most advanced elements among the Bombay proletariat, although the depression that followed the collapse of the 1924 strike made any effective organisation work almost impossible. It was under the initiative of the worker's club that the strike committee was set up in the beginning of the last lockout. Soon after the lockout had been declared the club converted itself into the Union of the Cotton Mill Workers. In less than two months it enlisted 14,000 members. The restoration of wages encouraged the workers, consequently the union maintains its existence and tries to enlist members, taking advantage of the general enthusiasm prevailing among the workers. The old union is affiliated to the Trade

Union Congress and has for its secretary Jhabvala (bourgeois humanitarian) who is a member of the executive of the TUC.

It was on the morrow of these events in Bombay, the industrial heart of the country—that the Trade Union Congress met in Madras. It was naturally to be expected that the Trade Union Congress would draw valuable lessons from the struggle of the Bombay workers for the benefit and future guidance of the entire labour movement. They were disappointed, who expected it. As a matter of fact, such expectation was misplaced. All through the ten weeks of struggle, the Trade Union Congress remained passive, except for the relief activities of its secretary Joshi. Absolutely no propaganda and agitation had been carried on either before or during the lockout. To go on deputations to the millowners and the British governor was the sole contribution. The concrete and most important outcome of the struggle—the union—is practically opposed by the Trade Union Congress, since the old fake union which is its organ does not liquidate itself in view of the rise of a live proletarian organisation. There are several very serious outstanding issues connected with the Bombay lockout. These issues should be raised and agitation carried on on the basis of them in order to consolidate the position gained and marshal the proletariat for further demands. After two years of depression, a rising tide is clearly to be noticed in the Indian labour movement. The North-Western Railway strike (in the beginning of 1925) was the first indication. Although the strike was lost, it coincided with a series of demonstrations in which tens of thousands of workers participated, flying red flags with revolutionary slogans inscribed on them. As usual the Trade Union Congress was nowhere in evidence. Three of its leading lights were lunching with Oudegust in Geneva and making speeches in London (imperial labour conference) when 40,000 striking railwaymen were demonstrating in India.

The deliberations of the Madras Trade Union Congress

(10 January) were not in the least affected by the two most important events of the labour movement during the preceding 12 months—the North-Western Railway strike (55,000 workers involved, lasting nearly two months) and the Bombay lockout. I am not mentioning here other minor but not unimportant events of the labour movement. The question of international affiliation, which was pigeon-holed in the previous congress to satisfy the nationalist leader C. R. Das, was not raised at all, although actions in connection with the Bombay lockout had brought that question nearer home. The ex-secretary, Chamanlal, according to his own statement, had told Oudeguest in Geneva (during the last conference of the International Labour Bureau) that the Indian Trade Union Congress would go neither to Amsterdam nor to Moscow because it had received invitations from both sides. The present general secretary, Joshi is however in favour of Amsterdam, and had been pressing for a decision to that effect for two years. A representative of the British Labour Party—Major Graham Pole was present at the Madras congress and warned the Indian labour movement against bolshevism.

The question of wages for the period of lockout still remains unsolved. The millowners have had their grievance (the excise duty) redressed. This victory of Indian capitalism has cost 156,000 workers ten weeks' wages. The first step toward the consolidation of the position gained by the Bombay workers and utilisation of the prevailing enthusiasm should be the agitation on the demand for the lock-out pay. Then, the depression in the Bombay cotton industry will continue even after the abolition of the excise duty. Therefore it is to be expected that the attack on the wages may be renewed. The moment is propitious for preparing the workers organisationally to meet successfully any such eventual attack. These are two of the most outstanding issues which arise out of the Bombay lockout. The Trade Union Congress was blissfully oblivious of them.

In 1924 the Trade Union Congress went practically into voluntary liquidation to secure the patronage of the nationalist Swaraj Party. The swarajist leader, Das, broke up the annual session of the TU Congress and threatened to organise a new trade union congress under the patronage of the Swaraj Party if his will would not prevail in the existing body. The official leaders of the Trade Union Congress (who were all seeking political careers as swarajist members of the legislative bodies) were cowed by the fury of the swarajist leader. The left wing, which had put forward a demand to amend the constitution of the TUC so as to make it a proletarian body was shattered. It was as yet too weak organisationally and too immature politically to meet the situation. Nevertheless, when the congress met at Bombay in the beginning of 1925, it was revealed that the revolutionary current could not have been altogether choked. For the first time in its none too eventful career, the kind-hearted gentlemen, nationalist politicians and unscrupulous careerists constituting the Trade Union Congress found the presidential chair occupied by a railway employee, who to the great discomfiture of the respectable gathering talked about class struggle. The presidential address must have been positively stunning, because the congress was otherwise sterile. The congress dispersed evidently with the determination to hunt heresy. It was very smoothly done. Nothing more was heard of Thengdi, who had startled the country with his speech as the president of the Trade Union Congress in Bombay. According to the constitution, the president of the congress automatically becomes the chairman of the executive until the next congress. But by some mysterious means the worker Thengdi was replaced by the English christian missionary, Andrews, who had broken and sabotaged not a few strikes in his highly christian way. As if to wash away the black spot in its history, this year the Trade Union Congress met under the presidency of an apolitical lawyer.*

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The accomplishment of the Madras Trade Union Congress was three resolutions. The first supported the bourgeois-nationalist demand for selfgovernment within the British empire; the second recommended the setting up of arbitration courts (by the government) to avert or to settle disputes between capital and labour; and the third demanded that there should be special workers' representatives on all the legislative bodies. Selfgovernment within the empire will mean the exploitation of the Indian working class jointly by native and imperialist capital. Even the revolutionary elements in the nationalist movement (intellectuals, petty bourgeoisie, etc) are against this political program of compromise between Indian capitalism and British imperialism. But the Trade Union Congress supports this program. This shows how much removed it is from the working class and how incapable it is of leading the Indian proletariat. To ask the brutally exploited Indian proletariat to pin its hope on an arbitration court is simply ridiculous and betrays an utter ignorance of the reality of the situation. Then parliamentarism in a country without a parliament is an imbecile imitation of the British Labour Party, which is the source of inspiration to the Indian Trade Union Congress, although some of its luminaries indulge in occasional outbursts against labour imperialism.