

REPORT II

ON THE ADVANCE OF OUR WORKING CLASS AND THE IDEOLOGICAL-ORGANISATIONAL OFFENSIVE OF THE BOURGEOISIE.

In 1952 today, it is hundred years since the first factories began to work in India and the new working class was born.

How far has it advanced in these hundred years?

In the early days the peasant, forced out of his land and village, ruined by landlords and moneylenders, with his handicrafts forcibly destroyed by the British Government and later by competition, resisted with uprisings, with guns in hand led by peasant partisan heroes; but he was beaten. He flocked to the new towns on the sea-coast, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, etc. where the British and their Indian agents found suitable conditions to build factories.

Jungle Law, Unlimited Working Day, Child Labour, No Rest.

From 1852 on to 1880, the working class in these factories was exploited most inhumanly and without pity. Arrogant Britishers, pious Hindus, religious Moslems, all combined irrespective of their religion, nationality, language or country in bleeding men, women and children in these slaughter houses of capital. There was neither law nor moral scruple to protect these millions, dazed by the new order, the new machines, the new unheard of ways of work and new masters, from the cruelties of capital in its birth on Indian soil, in a country conquered by a foreign imperialism and ravaged by its own landlords and monied traitors.

In those days, it was jungle law that prevailed. There was no limit on hours of work. Men, women and children were herded in the dens of capital to work from 12, 16, 18 and even 23 hours per day. There was no Sunday, no holiday, no starting and closing time. Children of five and six years of age worked full time as the grownups. And when they died or were maimed in the machines there was no value for their life or limb.

Who then brought capital to its senses and secured some law, some decency in the life of the worker and his exploitation? The whole history of working-class struggles the world over shows that the bourgeoisie never yielded any reform, any wage-increase or improvement to the workers without the workers waging determined struggles. The Indian bourgeoisie is no exception to the general characteristic of that class as such.

The protests of the working class in the early days were feeble and did not take to any strike struggle. When the cheap child labour of the Indian factories, run by the British and the Indian owners, competed seriously with the cotton textiles of Lancashire, the British owners in England demanded that the India Government prevent *excessive exploitation* of the Indian worker. The demand was not motivated by any pity for the women and children. It was a demand arising out of the needs of British capital to prevent undercutting of its price of production by the cheap labour of Indian children by capital in India. The first Factory Commissions to enquire into conditions of labour were thus born out of the quarrel among the thieves. The Commissions recommended Sunday holiday, and limit upon the age of children and night work by women. By 1890 Sunday holiday came into existence and child labour below 9 years was prohibited.

But that was only in the letter. Sunday holiday was nullified by calling workers to clean machinery on that day; child labour continued as before, with the change that every working child was given the certificate of being of the required age. There was yet no legal limit to hours of work.

Indian industrialists say that they had to struggle against the British competition to survive. But that struggle they conducted by means of children's labour, unlimited working-day of men and women and wholesale robbery of the earned wages of lakhs of workers. Not their heroism and money but robbery of our toil and our suffering that built them up. This they don't say.

The Fight for the Shorter Working Day

Following the crisis of 1905-7 and the political upheavals in which the working class began to take interest as shown in the political strike of 1907 in Bombay, the Government of India appointed a Commission and in 1911 limited the working day to 11 hours.

But all such limitations remained ineffective because, in the absence of an organised and conscious working class, the bourgeoisie would never give up its jungle-law and club-rule.

The first world war and the Russian Revolution brought the first wave of class consciousness and strike struggles to the Indian factory worker, in the big cities and towns. The fight for higher wages, dearness allowance, bonus, and shorter hours of work began to figure in the demands of the workers from 1917 onwards. In 1920, the workers of Bombay on their own demanded 10 hour day and threatened to strike. The government and the employers acceded to 10 hour day in 1920 and the law was enacted in 1922. It was in this period that the Trade Union movement arose, gathered strength and became a mighty weapon of the working class, to achieve its demands.

Since 1918, when the workers began their struggles not only on individual factory scale but industry and area-wise against the employers, what have been the gains of the working class and how did they achieve them?

To the working class of today 18 hours' work would look horror. A child of 7 years to stand by the machines for 18 hours would bring today a whole factory on strike. Workers today strike for weeks against the arbitrary dismissal of even a single worker. They know the time by the clock and come and leave by it. They demand and will have their pay within 7 days of the month end. And above all the greatest thing is that they have the 8 hour day—their biggest achievement. The fight for the normal working day is the beginning of the liberation struggle of the working class.

The strike struggles of 1920 brought the 10 hour day. The struggles of 1930-34 gave us the 9 hour day and the post-war upheavals made the Congress Governments give effect to the 8 hour day in 1946.

One hundred years ago, out of 24 hours the worker had not even 6 hours of his own. All his time was labour time to produce profits for the bourgeoisie. Now 8 hours are labour and 16 hours his own.

The Fight for Living Wage

Along with the fight for the normal working-day, the workers had to fight for a living wage. That fight is not yet won, but the T. U. movement today is on the way to it. Until the first world

war, the movement for higher wages had not taken an organised form. The bourgeoisie till then refused to accept that the worker had a family and that he must get an adequate wage to maintain a family and not only himself. To the bourgeoisie, each member of the worker's family was merely a "hand" to be put to use at his machine, whether it be of the woman or the child.

It is during the twenties that the movement for higher wages and bonus payments arose with a force and some gains were made. But living wage as such till today remains to be achieved.

The anarchy of wages in the same industry and same place was first beaten down by the workers' struggles for the *standard wage* in any industry. The fight for the standard wage was a fight for a uniform wage and elimination of competition among the workers themselves. It was a fight to build their industrial and class solidarity.

This fight even helped the bourgeoisie to restore order in its cost-structure and thus provided capital also with uniform conditions of exploitation in relation to one another in the matter of the purchase of labour power.

The fight for the standard wage remained essentially a matter located to particular industries and areas. Standard wage had been proposed by the bourgeoisie in Bombay mills in 1897, but it was never carried out until the workers in the Bombay Textile strike of 1928 demanded and won it.

The standard wage led to questions of *minimum wage*, and the *living wage*. In a number of places and industries, the minimum for a job was obtained as in Bombay Textiles. Even the principle that the wage of the worker must be based upon the admission that it is his wage as the earner of a family, that it must be a family wage and not individual wage was being gradually recognised.

The principal gains in this matter came as a result of the struggles in the period of the second world war.

That there should be a minimum sum of money below which no one should be paid for his day's labour and that, that minimum should be valid for the whole country—this principle was forced on the government and the bourgeoisie through persistent struggles. The admission of this principle ultimately came through the Central Pay Commission of the Government of India. As the largest employer of labour on the Railways and salaried employees, it admitted Rs. 30/- as the minimum to be paid *on a national scale* to every employee in its service. This set the stan-

dard for all private employers also. All unskilled workers on low wages demanded levelling up. And the skilled workers demanded a relative grading up of their wages. The Central Pay Commission had been appointed only for Government and Railway employees. But by an irony of history, not visualised by the government or the bourgeoisie, it became in a way, the *central propagandist* of the working-class demand, on a national scale for a *national minimum*. It sanctioned and sanctified the principle of a national minimum.

The thirty rupees minimum certainly was not a minimum living wage. But the struggle for the living wage was being disrupted by the disunity of the T. U. movement and the shrewd manoeuvres of the bourgeoisie. Instead of the living wage, the Congress Government passed the fake legislation of the *Minimum Wage Act* prescribing minimum wages in sweated industries. That is only a manoeuvre in the interest of the big bourgeois monopolists to help them against the small, though it is done in the name of the workers. The minimum wage law in no way gives us the living wage, that is, the wage that would permit a worker to live a civilised decent life with his wife and children.

In the early days even the earned wages were mulcted by way of fines, arbitrary deductions and confiscations. The passing of the *Payment of Wages Act* in 1936 reduced the robbery of workers' earnings by limiting fines to not more than 3% of the earnings and compelled the bourgeoisie to pay the workers' dues within seven days of their falling due at the end of the month. Till then, the employers used to keep two months' wages on hand, thus forcing the working class to give the bourgeoisie free credit of two months' labour, and allowing them to trade on these vast advances free of interest, while the workers had to enter into debts for food, rent and other necessities. That was one more blow to curb the robbers.

The Fight For Social Insurance

A normal working day and a living wage are incomplete without *social security*, that is, social insurance against old age, sickness, accident, unemployment and maternity leave.

These questions were not raised in a general form in the early days of the T. U. movement. In the period after the first world war, demand was made and the law was passed providing for compensation against injury and accidents. That was surely

an achievement, as the worker's life and limb got a value to be paid for by the employer, not only when it produced profits for him, but also when it was lost by the worker in the service of the employer. By that law the worker came to be recognised as a human being and ceased to be valued merely as a piece of machine. In fact machines were better looked after than men.

The bourgeoisie, however, refused to accept responsibility for sickness, unemployment and old age. To accept that the employer must pay for the maintenance of the worker, when he is sick or old or unemployed, or when a woman worker goes to hospital for motherhood, was to accept fundamentally *new principles* of working class life and social organisation. It was to accept the fact that when the workers had ceased to produce due to old age, sickness, unemployment or maternity they had a claim on social wealth or the part of it held by the bourgeoisie to maintain them, that when they were in production, they had produced so much surplus and contributed so much to the social fund and bourgeois property as to entitle them to claim maintenance even when they ceased to produce and that every producer of wealth, every unit of labour power today was so productive as to claim such maintenance.

The bourgeoisie naturally resisted with all its might the admission of such principles. But outside India, the working class in Europe had already fought these battles and forced bourgeois society to accept the principles of the political economy of the working class. Social security legislation was forced on the bourgeois state by the working class. The stand of the bourgeoisie that the worker produced as much as he was paid in wages and that his relations with the product and its owner, the bourgeoisie, ceased as soon as he had ceased to produce was smashed by the working-class movement in Europe long ago. Thus when the workers in India raised the question of *leave with pay*, that is, the right to rest at the expense of the bourgeoisie and social insurance, bourgeois resistance did not take its stand on the basis of *principle* but on the basis of the *capacity* of the industry to bear the costs.

The fight for social insurance is an uphill one. *Compensation* for accident and injury was established by the 1923 Act. But they would not agree to pay wages during sickness or unemployment. Partial compensation for *involuntary unemployment* arose during the second world war in the jute industry because the jute mill-owners were afraid of losing their labour force during stoppages, as the war afforded alternative employments and at better wages

than in the jute industry. Thus for the first time unemployment of a type came to be partly paid for. *Maternity benefits* became general during the war in order to attract female labour when male labour ran short or when the employers did not want to pay men's full rates for the job to women. *Leave with pay* systems existed in some undertakings for office workers, but it had not been applied to factory workers. Annual holidays with pay were introduced at the end of the war, in some industries. *Sickness insurance* was discussed in 1944. The Employees' State Insurance Act, to provide insurance against sickness, accident and maternity and the Provident Fund Act to cover old age and retirement have been passed but are not yet effective due to the sabotage of the employers and the government.

The bourgeoisie refuses to agree to these measures. And where it agrees the greatest shortcoming of these measures is that they are applied only to a few industries and the workers are made to contribute a part of their wages to these insurance funds, on which the employers' contribution is made conditional. The insurance is hedged in with so many conditions and bureaucratic obstruction that their full value ceases to reach the needy workers.

The Right To Form Trade Unions

Another achievement of great value that requires to be recorded is the right of T. U. organisation. The right of the workers to form trade unions and conduct strike struggles was challenged by the British and Indian bourgeoisie aided by its law courts in the days of the first world war in the Madras Case. But soon the wave of strike struggles and the rise of trade unions silenced the government and the employers, who then considered it advisable to pass the T. U. Act of 1926 and thus legalise the organisation of T. U.'s and the strike struggles.

Thus in hundred years we advanced from a state of jungle law to some order in the world of exploiters. We have secured the acceptance of certain principles and laws embodying them, though their effective observance depends on the strength of the working class. We have secured:

1. 8 hour day.
2. Sunday rest.
3. Interval rest for meals.
4. Prohibition of child labour.

5. Compensation for accident.
6. Maternity benefits and leave.
7. Leave with pay.
8. Timely payment of wages.
9. Limit on fines and robbery of earned wages.
10. Provident Fund Act.
11. State Insurance Act.
12. The Minimum Wage limit.
13. Right to bonus.
14. Wages linked to prices or cost of living.
15. Compensation for involuntary unemployment.

This short review of the principal achievements of the working class will show us how we have fared since the new industrial worker was born in Indian Society, how from a hunted animal, beaten, flogged and forced to work in mines, plantations and mills, with his wife and children, young and old in the grinding wheels of rapacious capitalism aided by the British bayonets and the moral beatings of the Indian bourgeoisie, he has come to be a man standing up in defence of his rights as man and worker, as the builder and pillar of our society. To know this should give him confidence in his strength, his struggles and his victories. What lessons for the future does he give us and what now are the tasks before him?

From the review of the struggles and achievements of the working-class and T. U. movement, certain lessons stand out, which the working class must note in its further march. These lessons may be roughly outlined as follows:

The first thing to be noted is that all these gains of the workers came as a result of struggles and sacrifices. There were strikes, in which thousands and lakhs participated, hundreds were killed and sent to prisons, before the bourgeoisie yielded. Not without furious class struggle was anything gained.

Second thing to be noted is that it is not only the foreign British Government that opposed these rights being given. The British and the Indian big bourgeoisie joined hands in fighting the working class and its demands for better living and working conditions.

The third thing to be noted is that not until the workers began to unite and struggle as a class, irrespective of their caste or communal divisions, did they become effective.

The fourth thing is that not until the workers entered into the political battles against the ruling class and were led by political parties guided by the class outlook and philosophy of the working class did they make any substantial gains.

The fifth is that while the initial mass battles of the working class and their trade unions were led by the Communists and their friends, it is only when the Communists and non-Communists formed a united front and maintained the unity of the working class and the trade unions irrespective of their political differences that onslaughts of the bourgeoisie could be defeated and effective gains made.

The sixth is that with the increasing violence of the ruling class against the workers, the need of combining the workers' struggle with that of the peasantry and other working people has become apparent and where such alliance comes about the disruption of the struggle of the workers and also that of the peasant is becoming difficult for the enemies of the working class.

The seventh thing to be noted is that the struggles of the workers in India have always been helped by the class-conscious workers of other countries, that the international solidarity of the working class of the world has always been a factor in the success we have achieved. It is only since the Russian Revolution and now the Chinese that the arrogant bourgeoisie has been brought to respect the rights of the workers, despite the ferocious hatred it bears towards them.

That, in short, is what the history of the hundred years of development of the working-class movement in India teaches us. Every phase of our struggles illustrates for us one or the other of the above seven lessons. We must carefully study how these conclusions arise and what they mean for us today.

The bourgeoisie and its agents in the working class are organising a powerful ideological offensive against the organised working class. The aim of the offensive is to eradicate the above seven lessons from the minds of the working class and the consciousness that its gains have been made because it fought struggles, which alone bring out those lessons.

The organised T. U. movement is faced with the urgent problem of the ideological building up of the working class, which we have to take in hand immediately.

Challenging us ideologically, the bourgeoisie is building up rival T. U. organisations, and disrupting working-class unity in order that we may not be able to advance further in winning better working and living conditions and achieving People's Democracy.

With a working class ideologically tied to the bourgeoisie through the Congress and the reactionary Right-wing Socialists, and organisationally divided, the landlord-bourgeois government hopes to pass the burden of the crisis on to the backs of the toiling masses and thereby save the exploiting monopolists and their rule.

It is, therefore, necessary to understand our T. U. movement in the past and organise it in the future in the light of the above lessons.