

THE GHERAO MOVEMENT

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The spectre of gheraos is once again haunting the minds of industrialists here. West Bengal workers are resorting to this novel weapon more and more.

A.K. Jain, president of the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said at a two-day tripartite state Labor Advisory Board meeting, which opened in Calcutta June 10, that during the past three months there had been more than 160 cases of gheraos. According to him, in a number of cases the gheraos were accompanied by violence and intimidation.

J.M. Parson, president of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said that tea plantations witnessed the worst type of gheraos. (Indian Express, June 11, 1969.)

This meeting, in which employers

and the United Front government of West Bengal talked with representatives of various trade unions, did not reach a consensus on the problem of gheraos.

"Gherao" means virtually a state of siege laid by the workers against the employers in the very premises of the factories. Economic issues are involved in most of the gheraos and the workers resort to this weapon to win immediate redress of grievances.

The significance of gheraos for the development of class consciousness among the workers can be properly assessed only in the light of a class analysis of the labor policy of the Indian bourgeoisie.

They have elaborated an intricate and time-consuming machinery involving a plethora of complex labor and industrial-dispute laws, to settle grievances and

direct the class struggle of the workers into peaceful channels and into closer and closer cooperation with the capitalist state. By law as well as by their endorsement of the Agreement to maintain industrial truce, the trade unions must function within this framework. By its very nature, the machinery engenders bureaucracy, red-tapism, and a special expertise on labor problems that is separated from the workers.

Trade-union activity in India at present demands full-timers who, when they hail from the ranks of the Communist or Socialist parties, tend to be sucked into the apparatus, increasingly pacified, and reduced to the level of business unionism.

Dissatisfied with what happens to their grievances when they are processed through this machinery, the workers are increasingly leaning toward direct action.

Gheraos have several advantages from the standpoint of the class struggle. It is a form of direct action involving many workers as against the petitioning, letter-writing, and parleying carried on by bureaucratic leaders behind the back of the rank and file.

Gheraos leave employers no alternative but to immediately consider longstanding grievances of the workers and to concede to their demands if they want to be released.

Gheraos convince the workers that direct action pays off.

Gheraos often give rise to an immediate confrontation with the bourgeoisie and their state. This can become conspicuous, especially when the police or military intervene in behalf of the employers. This raises the question of the class character of the state and direct action in relation to government power.

Gheraos teach the workers to disregard the norms of bourgeois legality, so assiduously cultivated by both the state and the trade-union apparatus.

Once again West Bengal has proved to be a breeding ground for gheraos. One need not be surprised at this. As admitted by the West Bengal labor minister, there had been no wage revision for a decade in the engineering industry. The jute workers, not without reason, were pressing for wage increases. In the tea industry, most gardens had not properly implemented the wage-board recommendations.

The Supreme Court of India has

ruled gheraos to be illegal, holding that workers who engage in them can be prosecuted under the Indian penal code.

The West Bengal unit of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, the labor organization of the Congress party, the classic party of Indian capitalism, does not support gheraos.

On the other hand, the United Trade Union Congress of the Revolutionary Socialist party, one of the members of the United Front in West Bengal, favors them.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) displays an equivocal attitude toward gheraos. The United Front government of Kerala which is dominated by the CPI(M) proposes to adopt a stern posture against gheraos in Kerala. M. Basavapunniah, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPI(M), defines the party's attitude toward gheraos in a lead article scheduled for publication in the party's official journal People's Democracy.

He equates gheraos with other forms of struggle such as civil disobedience, satyagraha [Gandhi's passive resistance], picketing, and hunger strikes. But he hastens to add that the CPI(M) will not idealise gheraos as a miracle weapon to fight working-class battles. He admits that the gherao weapon is not used by the working class as confidently and frequently under the Congress government as under the United Front government in either West Bengal or Kerala. He attributes this to the prolabor policy of these two governments. But it can also be taken as a sign of dissatisfaction with the vacillating policy which these governments display toward labor.

The CPI(M) leader disapproves of the capitalist campaign against the workers' right to resort to gheraos. But he expresses his concern over a gherao in essential services.

The Naxalites, the so-called true Maoists, do not seem so far to have elaborated their stand on the problem of gheraos. This omission is not surprising, since in general the Naxalites have no programme worthy of the name for proletarian struggles in the cities.

In their obsession with the peasantry and encircling the cities from the villages, in their rash, adventurist, isolated, and in essence terrorist acts, they have momentarily forgotten the gheraos.

In view of the extremely volatile economic situation in India, and particularly with a professedly prolabor regime holding office in West Bengal, the incidence of gheraos is likely to increase in the near future in West Bengal.