CHAPTER VI

CAPITAL, LABOUR AND THE STATE
The inter-war period saw many attempts towards formation of trade unions in all the industries under consideration. They had their own weaknesses. At the same time, the employers, in general, were singularly hostile towards the representative unions of workers while conniving with the strike-breakers. Furthermore, the Indian capitalists as a class depended mainly on the coercive machinery of the State in moments of crisis in the management of labour.

The Kankinarrah Labour Union (KLU) was formed in 1921 with the special purpose of looking after the grievances of 50,000 millhands employed in 12 jute mills situated within Bhatpara Municipality, about 21 miles north of Calcutta\(^1\). At the end of the 1920s, the Union complained to the Royal Commission about the attitude of the mill agents and managers:

Until recently the mere mention of the name of the Labour Union annoyed a certain class of mill managers, who could not tolerate their workmen joining the union, and often threw letters addressed by the union into the waste-paper baskets. In fact even workers were dismissed at the instigation of the Sirdars for the heinous offence of joining the union as members. Managers and managing agents of mills, with some exceptions, ignored union letters even after the registration of the union under the Indian Trade Unions Act [1926]\(^2\).

The KLU lost its support among the workers during the general strike of 1929. The president of the Union, K.C. Ray Chaudhury, reported on 10th February 1930 that his union had a membership of only 1,000 millhands\(^3\). It is interesting to note that the entrepreneurs in the jute

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2 ibid., p. 272.
industry extended their support to the KLU after it ceased to enjoy the confidence of the millhands. E.C. Benthall of Bird & Co., while representing the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, told the Royal Commission (February, 1930) : "We support the Kankinarah Labour Union of Mr. Chaudhury". The Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA) also expressed their concern to the Commission about the non-representative character of the KLU : "Although there is a registered trade union in the Kankinara district, the workers at present are dealing with members of an unregistered trade union, and any complaints or grievances are supposed to be dealt with by this union".

The unregistered trade union that came to enjoy the support of the millhands during the 1929-strike was the Bengal Jute Workers' Union (BJWU). About 1,92,000 workers participated in the strike under its leadership. It was led by Miss Probhavati Dasgupta, and her leadership played a vital role in earning the confidence of the workers. But this strike did not lead to the growth of a 'strong union' in the jute industry. The IJMA did not accept this new union as a permanent body for negotiation with the workers. The Chairman of the IJMA urged the Government in the annual meeting of the Association in 1929 to take action against the strike leaders. On the other hand, a split developed in the BJWU after the strike and Miss Dasgupta was deposed from the leadership of the Union. As a result of this conflict, the Union lost the support of the majority of workers very soon.

4 ibid., p. 292.
A second general strike involving about 76 per cent of the labour force took place in the jute industry in 1937. But only 9,950 workers representing 4.5 per cent of the striking workforce were found to be members of 23 unions registered in that year. In 1939, two registered unions with only 1,686 members were found to exist in the industry. In the course of the general strike of 1937, a centralized trade-union, Bengal Chatkal Mazdur Union, came into being for giving leadership to the jute workers. But political differences among the leading groups concerned affected the unity move. Moreover, the Muslim League Government that came to power in Bengal in 1937 openly sided with the jute employers and exploited 'the communal sentiments' of a section of the workers to break the workers' unity. To put it in the words of one trade union spokesman of the time, Somnath Lahiri (December 25, 1938): "Its agents were at work everywhere stirring up the Hindus against the Muslims and the Muslims against the Hindus." The same spokesman admitted the failure of the Bengal Chatkal Mazdur Union to win support of the Muslim workers:

The Muslim workers, mostly, are outside the influence of the Unions and no serious and practical efforts are made to win them over to the side of the union and its struggle. If there is a strike against the will of the Muslim workers that is likely to alienate the communities even more than before.

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8 Indrajit Gupta, Capital and Labour in the Jute Industry (Bombay, 1953), p. 45.
10 ibid., p. 55.
Taking advantage of communal divisions among the workers, the Bengal Government set up a clearly communal rival body called the National Jute Workers' Union (popularly known as the 'white' union) in 1937 to organize strike-breaking. And Suhrawardy, a member of the Government, proposed to Chapman-Mortimer of Bird & Co. that the jute mills should provide money for running the unions under this communal body. Though the I.J.M.A., as a body, did not give official sanction to this proposal, many mill agents did. The 'white' union was found extremely active towards the end of the 1937 strikes. Thus, the State and the entrepreneurs joined hands in promoting communalism among the workers in the Bengal jute industry. But the Government-sponsored communal unions were found to enjoy no support among the workers by the end of the 1930s. This fact did not miss the attention of the commercial weekly of British capital, *Capital* (August 31, 1939):

......it is a fairly well-established principle that recognition of a trade union should depend essentially on whether that union really represents the trade or not. In Bengal to-day, however, membership has nothing to do with the question of recognition. There are apparently two types of unions - unofficially sponsored and officially sponsored. Recognise the former, and you will be harassed by officialdom in a dozen different ways. Recognise the latter, and in all probability you will find yourself without a labour force in less time than it takes you to think of the possibility.

Unlike the jute industry, the coal industry in India witnessed no general strike during our period of study. Labour discontent was noticed in the Raniganj coalfield during the Gandhi-led non-cooperation movement in the early 1920s under the leadership of two Swamis Biswanand and Darsananand. The workers in the European-managed collieries were

fomented to participate in strikes. As a result, strikes took place at six collieries of Andrew Yule, four collieries of Equitable Coal Company and one of Bird in 1920, involving altogether 5,300 miners demanding higher wages and more honourable treatment from the European colliery managers. By 1922, the labour movement organized in Raniganj had collapsed. In late 1921, the Jharia Trade Union Congress caused a good deal of excitement among the colliery workers and the collieries were practically shut down for a week. A strike occurred in the Giridih coalfield in January 1923, but the workers returned unconditionally within a fortnight. These stray incidents of setback of the strikes in the different coalfields in the early 1920s thwarted the formation of strong trade unions. The only trade union found to be in existence in the coal industry at the end of the 1920s was the Indian Colliery Employees' Association. But this Association had only 2,000 members of whom about 1,500 were ordinary miners. The leadership of this union was in the hands of those who were part of the supervising staff. The employers adopted a hostile attitude towards this union. Siba Kali Bose of this Association alleged to the Royal Commission:

The attitude of the employers is markedly hostile to this organisation. Members of the Association are harassed and threatened with disciplinary action and in one case, with curtailment of privileges.


In the late 1930s, the industrial establishments in Bihar faced labour discontent to a considerable extent. A strike took place at Bird & Co.'s Katrasgarh collieries in 1938. It lasted for about three months and affected about 7000 workers. This time labour protests were accompanied by formation of trade unions. At the end of the 1930s, three registered trade unions were found to operate in the Jharia coalfield—the Indian Colliery Labour Union, the Tata's Collieries Labour Association and the Indian Miners' Association. Their number of members were 3521, 3123 and 4000 respectively. A Coal-Workers' Union was also formed in 1938 with its headquarters at Giridih. Disunity among the leaders was very much a part of trade union organization formed in the late 1930s. "In the coalfields it was the competition among the leaders rather than the strength of the organisation, that impressed us", wrote the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee (BLEC) in 1940. The employers in Bihar adopted a hostile attitude towards the new-born trade unions and were not prepared to recognize their right to participate in issues related to the management of labour. This is evident in the following observation made by the Enquiry Committee:

Demands for improvement in wages and conditions of work have been the more general causes of strikes. But there have also been other fundamental causes like the employer's refusal to recognise trade unions, and the attempts at victimization of workers connected with union activities which raise important issues in regard to the workers' rights of free association and collective bargaining.

18 ibid., p. 245.
19 ibid., p. 260.
A number of general strikes took place in the Bombay textile industry during the inter-war years. In the first general strike of 1919, the mill workers participated in a spontaneous manner without the assistance of formal organizations like trade unions\(^{20}\). The foundations of the first full-fledged trade union of millworkers in Bombay, the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal (GKM), had been laid in December 1923. This union drew strength from the general strike of 1924 and its membership amounted to 3500 in 1926. The GKM did not pose any challenge to the jobbers. Several jobbers and relatively better paid workers joined this union. From the middle of 1925 the GKM deliberately sought the backing of jobbers and by September 1926 about sixty had joined\(^{21}\). This pro-jobber attitude of the union continued in later years. This is evident in the following communication of the GKM to the Royal Commission on Labour:

> Jobbers bring men for work. They know how to repair machines and supervise the working staff and their work. Hence it is quite necessary to keep jobbers. In the absence of jobbers the work will suffer\(^{22}\).

In December 1925, leading trade unionists in Bombay decided to form a central union incorporating all textile workers in the city. In

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pursuance of this decision, the Bombay Textile Labour Union (BTLU) came into being through the amalgamation of a number of smaller unions. The BTLU began with a membership of about 5000. By the end of 1926, the membership rose to about 10000, of which the number paying monthly subscriptions was nearly 6000. Throughout the life of the union its members were drawn mostly from two areas - Madanpura and Kurla. Some prominent mills and working-class areas in Bombay including Parel were outside the influence of the union. In the course of its work, the BTLU gained support predominantly from the Muslim millhands. The mill committees formed at the initiative of the union could not curtail jobbers' authority and had to rely on jobbers' gangs for gaining support of the workers. In general, the BTLU intervened in the disputes between the employers and jobbers' gangs, but kept itself aloof from the disputes between the jobbers and the workers. In spite of the Union's non-intervention in the jobber-worker relationship, it could not win support of the jobbers in many mills.23

During the mammoth general strike of 1928 (April 26 to October 6) in the Bombay mill industry, the Communist-dominated Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) came into being and established its leadership over the mill workers very soon. While characterizing the growth of the Union, one of its prominent leaders, S.A. Dange, said: "The Girni Kamgar Union really began to function from October, after the calling off of the strike. Since then the membership began to soar up continuously till January, in which month the collection of subscription and strike fund was the highest."24 According to Dange, the GKU-membership was 28000 in October

1928 and over 100,000 in January 1929. The Registrar of Trade Unions in Bombay did not accept Dange's reported membership for the GKU, 80,000, in December 1928 and 'persisted in announcing it as 54,000 only'. In spite of such anomaly, the enormous support enjoyed by the Union among the workers is beyond doubt. Even the Bombay Millowners' Association reported to the Royal Commission that the GKU had 70,000 members 'at one time'.

Initially, the GKU depended on the traditional authority of the jobbers for mobilizing the mill workers. But, in course of time the mill committees formed under the leadership of the Union established their own power and posed a challenge to the 'old discipline' enforced by the jobbers over the workers. The jobbers who refused to identify themselves with the mill committees were set upon and beaten in the mills and in the streets. But the GKU did not succeed in taking control of Muslim-dominated Madanpura from the BTLU. Though the Union was represented by all sections of the workers in its heyday, religious differences persisted among them. While the GKU established a stronghold among the high caste Hindu weavers, its organizational influence in the spinning departments was relatively weak. The caste and community divisions among the workers came to light in moments of crisis.

During the general strike of 1929 (April 26 to the fourth week of May when the strike actually petered out, though the GKU formally called it off on September 19), the millowners in Bombay adopted a communal

25 Ibid., p. 325.
strategy to break the strike. They started employing Pathans in place of regular workers in their mills. This led to communal riots in Bombay. Even G.D. Birla felt uncomfortable at the 'Parsee' millowners' method of breaking the strike by employing Pathans. In a letter to Thakurdas (May 10, 1929), Birla prayed to 'God' to help the Hindus 'if the peaceful Hindu labour were kicked out of Bombay and replaced by Mohammedan hooligans'.

It should be kept in mind in this context that the Pathans in Bombay city (whom the workers hated as coercive moneylenders) were the targets of attack of millworkers in the February-riot in 1929. The millowners took advantage of the hostile relationship between the Pathans and millworkers. The unity among the workers badly suffered in the face of communal rioting which degenerated into clashes between Muslim workers and Hindu strikers. Another cleavage developed in the strike when Ambedkar, the leader of the 'depressed classes', urged the 'untouchable' millhands to return to work. Some of Ambedkar's followers accepted money from the millowners for recruiting 'untouchables' in the villages and brought them to Bombay as strike-breakers. It is to be noted here that both the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal and BTLU were opposed to this strike called by the GKU.

After the collapse of the general strike of 1929, the leadership of the GKU over the millworkers came to an end, and the age-old rule of the jobbers in mill management was restored. The membership of the Union came down to 800 in 1930. The millowners in Bombay were not prepared

to part with the jobber system of management. The fact that the millowners were hostile to the mill committees of the GKU was evident in the Memorandum of the Bombay Government to the Royal Commission:

The Bombay Girni Kamgar Union has alleged that individual mills in Bombay had adopted a deliberate policy of wrecking their mill committees by victimising those workers who had been elected on them. This matter was one of the issues on which the Bombay Girni Kamgar Union called a general strike of the workers in the Bombay mills with effect from the 26th April, 1929.

The Superintendent of the E.D. Sassoon group of Mills, F. Stones, testified in December 1929 that his company tried to form a company union in 1922 to establish control over the workers. He had the idea that two or three trade union officials selected from the Maratha community would be 'capable of handling labour'. By the end of the 1920s, he lost faith on Indian trade union leaders and supported the suggestion given by the Fawcett Committee (formed by the Bombay Government after the calling off of the general strike of 1928) to bring trade unionists from England in order to train Indians. But there was a distinct change in the political landscape of Bombay after the Congress Government came to power in 1937. The Bombay Government made attempts at setting up new, more docile unions. And the Bombay Chief Minister, B.G. Kher, came under attack from trade unionists for using government money in forming pro-Congress unions.

The Bombay Trade Disputes Act (1938) passed by the Government faced considerable opposition from the labour leaders on the ground that

the Act was meant to deprive the workers of their fundamental right to strike. A one-day general strike of textile workers in Bombay took place on 7th November 1938 to protest against the Act. Rather than helping the development of representative trade unions of workers, the Act openly strengthened the hands of Bombay capitalists. While commenting on the clause incorporated in the Act regarding the registration of trade unions, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, remarked in a confidential note (December 14, 1938) that 'company unions' were 'definitely encouraged and given very great advantages over independent unions'. Thus, the scheme of controlling labour with the help of company union tried by the giant textile mill agent in Bombay, E.D. Sassoon & Co., in the early 1920s got institutional (State) support from the Congress Raj in the late 1930s.

No trade union of the millworkers existed in Ahmedabad when the first general strike took place in the Ahmedabad textile industry in 1918. Gandhi gave leadership to the workers in this strike and began his experiment of developing a harmonious capital-labour relation in the city of Ahmedabad. In a leaflet issued during the strike, Gandhi advised the workers:

We can never wish ill to the employers; in all that we do, we are bound to consider their interests. We shall promote the workers' interest while duly safeguarding the employers.

35 The Indian Yearbook, 1939-40, p. 530.
36 Quoted in Markovits (1981), op. cit., p. 514.
The Textile Labour Association (TLA), a brainchild of Gandhi, emerged as a federation of several occupation-based unions promoted in different points of time in 1920. The membership of these unions totalled 17550 out of a labour force of 43515. The total membership rose to 24185 in June 1922. The millworkers of Ahmedabad suffered badly in the general strike of 1923 and all the monetary gains won by them during the previous five years were washed away. After this defeat, the TLA started losing support among the workers. The membership of all the unions had drastically fallen after the calling off of the strike. The total number of members in the weavers' union decreased from 4000 to 778. Only the spinners of the 'depressed classes' (who were members of the Throstle Workers' Union) remained steady in their commitment to the TLA; its membership declined from 5000 to 4500. The TLA failed to draw the weavers of Ahmedabad mills, most of whom were Muslims, within its fold in later years. On 1st March, 1929, the weavers' union had only 825 members. When asked about their non-membership in the TLA - affiliated union, two Muslim weavers told the Royal Commission:

At first we were members of the Union but afterwards we left it because we did not like its activities. At present it is only a nominal Labour Union and is greatly under the influence of the millowners.

The TLA did not disturb the jobber system of labour management. On

the contrary, it gave recognition to the jobbers as a separate category of workers. The earliest union of workers in Ahmedabad was the Mill Jobbers' and Mukadams' Union formed in February 1919. This union ceased functioning in the later half of 1922, but was recreated in March 1926. The union had 700 members in 1929. It should be noted here that Ambalal Sarabhai received objection from the TLA when he made an abortive attempt to do without jobbers in one of his mills.

The Royal Commission on Labour highly praised the TLA in 1931 as a unique trade union in India:

In Ahmedabad, the workers, excluding the Musalman weavers, are organised in a group of craft unions which, participating in a common central federation, have a strength and cohesion probably greater than those of any other labour unions [in India].

In spite of its continued existence, the TLA membership at the end of the 1920s—about 18000—was much below its membership prior to the 1923 strike. The unrivalled leadership of the TLA over the mill workers in Ahmedabad came to an end in the 1930s. A communist union, the Mill Mazdoor Union (MMU), was formed in Ahmedabad in or about August 1932 by Jamaluddin Hassan Bukhari, and its membership was estimated to be 9000 in 1934. The leaders of the MMU capitalized the grievances of the weavers in building their organization. During February and March 1934, no less than twenty strikes took place in the textile industry of Ahmedabad mainly under the leadership of the MMU. But the Union was not

43 ibid., p. 278.
recognized either by the Ahmedabad Millowners' Association or by any individual mill.\(^{46}\)

The MMU was declared unlawful in November 1934. The members of the Congress Socialist Party in Gujarat joined hands with the Communists in the mid-1930s to give leadership to the workers' struggle in Ahmedabad. Considerable discontent was noticed among the millworkers in Ahmedabad in 1937. A Central Strike Committee organized by the leftists launched strikes in thirty-seven mills of Ahmedabad. These strikes involved about 30000 workers and posed a powerful challenge to the leadership of the TLA.\(^{47}\) In the \textit{Harijan} (November 20, 1937) Gandhi noted with concern 'perpetual dread of lightning or unauthorized strikes' in Ahmedabad.\(^{48}\)

At the end of the 1930s, the TLA remained the only union of millworkers recognized by the millowners. But a large number of workers remained outside its fold. In 1939, the total number of workers in the Ahmedabad textile industry was 100949 out of whom 27663 were members of the TLA.\(^{49}\)

Besides the hostile attitude of the employers regarding the formation of representative trade unions and the internal problems of the unions themselves, the provincial governments with the help of the


police and military, adopted ruthless coercion to suppress all organized labour movements. There are many such instances during the inter-war period.

The Bombay millowners' lack of communication with the workers was evident in the general strike of 1919. It was not the millowners or their representatives, but the Commissioner of Police, Vincent, who announced the terms of settlement of the strike before a large crowd of workers. Immediately before the announcement of the general strike in 1923, the Ahmedabad millowners supplied lorries to the police for patrolling the working-class localities. Such police intervention during the strikes continued in the late 1920s. At an early stage of the general strike of 1928 in Bombay, the Commissioner of Police issued orders prohibiting picketing at the mills. There were large-scale police arrangements in the mill area from the day the general strike of 1929 began. Meetings and processions were banned. During the strike, the police resorted to firings on a number of occasions which resulted in the death of some workers and injuries to many. The Government of Bombay established military pickets in working-class areas during the riots that followed the strike of 1929. These army pickets were kept even after the termination of riots, because there was the likelihood of labour protests owing to the decision of the millowners to withhold the pay of the strikers on pay day.

The Bengal Government also acted in coercive ways against the

workers during the capital-labour conflicts. A major strike took place in three Fort Gloster jute mills in the second half of 1928. A considerable force of police had been posted at the jute mills even before the strike started. The presence of the police created 'a state of unrest' among the workers. The trouble started when the mill management closed a mill without paying wages to the workers. The situation took a bad turn when the workers were beaten by the mill gatekeepers as they were demanding wages. The police opened fire on the millworkers and about 23 men were injured. At the outbreak of the general strike of 1929 in the jute industry, the Chairman of the Indian Jute Mills Association, and, later, representatives of the managing agents of the affected mills, approached the Police Department with a view to securing adequate police protection in the mills. Though the Government refrained from making use of rifles in this strike, it gave free rein to the police and magistracy to issue prohibitory order and beat, assault and arrest the strikers, and their leaders. A communique of the Government of Bengal conferred, since September 1936, additional powers, particularly in regard to meetings of industrial workers, on the Commissioner of Police in Calcutta and the neighbouring District Magistrates.

The Provincial Governments that came to power in 1937 also adopted

coercive methods in their dealings with labour. The Muslim League
Government in Bengal took various repressive measures to suppress the
general strike of jute workers in 1937. Such measures included
promulgation of prohibitory orders under Section 144, Cr. P.C., arrest
of workers and their leaders and various acts of police and military
violence. Firing on workers took place in this strike. Moreover, it was
reported that the police and military entered into the workers'
quarters. The Congress Raj in Western India was found to adopt similar
repressive measures in the late 1930s. In order to fight the 'strike
fever' among textile workers in Ahmedabad, the Government promulgated
the application of section 144, Cr. P.C. to the whole city of Ahmedabad
on 19th November, 1937. Gandhi warned the Congress leaders in November
1937:

If in spite of honest effort by Congressmen, forces of
disorder cannot be brought under control without the assistance of
the police and the military, in my opinion, acceptance by the
Congress of the burden of office loses all force and meaning, and
the sooner the ministers are withdrawn, the better it would be for
the Congress and its struggle to achieve complete independence.

But Gandhi's advice fell on deaf ears. In the one-day protest
strike of textile workers in Bombay (7th November, 1938) against the
passing of the Bombay Trade Disputes Act, the police under the Congress
Raj opened fire on the demonstrators in different places in the town,
resulting in several dead and many injured.

The social backgrounds of the labour officers appointed in Bombay

58 See V.B. Karnik (1967), op. cit., pp. 284-86.
59 Mazmundar (1973), op. cit., p. 163.
and Calcutta in the 1930s also bear out amply the coercive notion of authority which the state and the entrepreneurs had in mind. The first Government labour officer appointed in Bombay, who took charge of his duties in September 1934, was W.B. Gilligan, an Irishman who had served in the Army. In November 1935, he was succeeded by A.W. Pryde, a former police officer. The labour officer appointed by the Bombay Millowners' Association (BMA) at the instance of the Government was C.A. Dalal, who had served in the same capacity with the E.D. Sassoon group of mills since 1931. The labour officer appointed by the BMA was supposed to cooperate with the Government labour officer, and act as a liaison officer between the Association and member mills. It may be reminded in this context that the Superintendent of the Watch and Ward Department of the Sassoon Mills was a 'well-known boxer' and that several mills of the Sassoon group continued to work during the one-day strike in 1938 with the help of the most significant dada in the industrial neighbourhood of Bombay. Following the general strike, the Bengal Government appointed a Labour Commissioner in 1937. In the same year, the Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA) decided to appoint a Labour Officer. Incidentally the first Labour Officer appointed by the IJMA was a retired police official, an Assistant Commissioner of Police. By 1938, the employers in the jute industry set up labour intelligence cells, which were staffed by ex-military men.


64 See Omkar Goswami (1987), op. cit., p. 583.