

CHAPTER X
IN PURSUIT OF A WORKERS' GOVERNMENT

By the end of 1945 economy of Travancore was at its serious predicament. The impact of Second World War only resulted in further hardships to the working class. However, the Communists took this as a favourable situation. From the very beginning of 1946, there was an active wave of strikes in the State with the main demand for bonus. In the meantime, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress was vigorously coordinating the labour unions in the state, resulting in the growth of the labour movement. The labour force, now demanded a self government for the State. These developments posed a serious threat to the administration. The Dewan soon was forced to announce on 16 January 1946, a forthcoming constitutional reform. Yet the militant labour unions in the state could not be convinced. When the attempts of the administration to pacify the labour force through tripartite labour conferences also proved negative, it resulted in the Punnapra-Vayalar Revolt of 1946.

Organised Strikes

Following the war, there was scarcity of foodgrains and a steep rise in the prices of foodstuffs and other essential commodities. The sea-borne trade with the United Kingdom and the neutral countries in coir products came to a standstill. Consequently more than 25,000 workers employed mostly in the

coir factories at Alleppy, Sherthalai and Quilon were thrown out of work.¹ Tormented with poverty and penury, the working class was receptive to any ideology that could provide them means to get away from these acute economic distress. Thus the spirit of socialism and revolution inculcated by the leftist leaders had a wide appeal among the workers. The fact was that many a times the Managing Committee meeting of labour unions was held in the Communist camp at night.² The new spirit of class solidarity naturally generated militancy among the workers.

Meanwhile the Government of India summoned a Tripartite Labour Conference in September 1943. Travancore was one of the six industrially important Indian states represented in the labour conference and the Standing Labour Committee.³ The conference had resolved to formulate a 'machinery to investigate questions of wages and earnings, employment and housing and social conditions generally.'⁴ As a result, the Government of India appointed the Labour Investigation Committee to enquire about labour conditions as decided at the Tripartite Conference. The Committee visited Travancore on 13 March 1944⁵ and conducted

1. Travancore Administrative Report 1930-1940, p.117.
2. Inspector of Police, Quilon, 9 April 1945, Confidential report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.687/1945/CS.
3. Administrative Report, Department of Industries, 1944, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1945, p.15.
4. Joshi, D.S., Deputy Secretary to Government of India, 12 February 1944, letter to Travancore Government, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.
5. Adarkar, B.P., Member Secretary, Labour Investigation Committee, 25 February 1944, letter to Director of Industries, D.Dis.2284/1945/Devpt.

an enquiry upto 16 March into the conditions of labour in the coir mats and matting industry in the state. The committee in its report had estimated the number of workers employed in industry around 30,000 during 1944-1945.⁶ The condition created by the war was so acute that soon after the war many of the coir factory workers were thrown out of employment and were forced to take up agricultural work. For the existing workers in the factories, wages were reduced to half the rate of 1939. Therefore, labour unions began to complain about the low wage rates, lack of proper medical aid to the labourers, supply of ration at high prices and insecurity of employment. In addition to unemployment, Sherthalai area was also affected by the ravages of famine. In spite of the efforts by the administration, unemployment continued unabated. The Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers Union sarcastically pointed out the situation as 'man-made famine'.⁷

After the war ended, the purchasers of coir goods especially from United States of America were showing a tendency to bargain for prices and insist on quality goods. This changed the trend of coir goods in the international markets. During the war they did not bargain for prices or insist on quality.

6. Indian Labour Gazette, January-June 1953, Vol.X, p. 533.

7. President, Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union, 18 October 1945, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.2/1946/Control.

Anything could be sold during the war. The hust owners in Travancore who were small capitalists tried to increase the price still higher and to unreasonable levels. Though the labour charges for spinning had not increased, the higher prices of coir forced a tendency to increase the price of yarn. The factory workers were also keen to demand increased wages. Consequently, the price of coir products had only increased. In America, whose ceiling prices were still operative, purchasers seemed to expect a fall in price due to the cessation of war hostilities.⁸ The result was that they seemed to watch for sometime and to purchase only their immediate requirements. They therefore made counter offers for reduction in prices against the wishes of local manufacturers. These facts seemed to be the causes of reduction in the value of orders received in Travancore. The Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union, however, suggested to the Government the recognition of the entire coir trade. The reduction in orders for coir goods seriously affected the local coir factories in Alleppy-Sherthalai area. In fact, when the War ended, nearly fifty to sixty per cent of the labourers were unemployed.⁹

8. Coir Controller, 7 November 1945, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.2/1949/Control.

9. President, Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers' Union, 18 October 1945, letter to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.2/1946/Control.

There were more piece-rate workers than time-rate workers in the coir industry in Travancore. By the beginning of 1946, a male worker in the coir factory received one rupee and nine annas as wage while an agricultural labourer of Kuttanad area got one rupee and eight annas as wage for a day.¹⁰ Since the prices of foodstuffs and other essential commodities rose high, poverty and starvation became rampant. In Alleppy town the cost of a standard meal became one rupee, which was only one and a half anna before the war.¹¹ Thus the shortage of food that prevailed during the war did not abate even after the end of it. To make matters worse, there were irregularities in the ration system. In fact the immediate post-war period saw the mounting grievances of the labourers in Travancore. As a result there was incessant strikes of industrial workers in Travancore by the beginning of 1946.

By 1940's labour strikes became a common feature in Travancore. The strike movement not only explained the solidarity of the working class but also the influence of leftist forces in them. In 1940 the labour force proposed to launch a general strike. The police, however, maintained that a general strike of the labourers would be a failure.¹² But

10. The Statistics of Travancore 1946-1947, Trivandrum, 1948, p.184.

11. Sixteen annas were equal to one rupee.

12. Inspector General of Police, 5 April 1940, letter to Chief Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.286/1940/CS.

soon the administration exercised the powers conferred by rule 56 of the Defence of Travancore Rules and banned all public meeting and processions in any part of the state.¹³ Yet the labour force revealed their class solidarity through constant agitations. They have set up action council, volunteer organisation, strike committee and publication committee as part of their strike movement. The most remarkable feature was the number of workers involved in the strikes and their militant solidarity. By 1946 bonus became the major demand of the industrial workers. Between 1938 and 1944 the Travancore Coir Factory Workers' Union organized six anniversary functions and brought their demand to the attention of the administration. Moreover the All Travancore Trade Union Congress Working Committee which summoned at Quilon in 1943 reminded the legal demand for bonus to the attention of the State and the capitalists.¹⁴ Gradually the bonus issue had grown into an all-Travancore issue, leading to organised strikes.

The workers' strike movement had the support of the public bodies like the S.N.D.P.Yogam. In the twelfth anniversary meeting of the Yogam at Karunagapally on 31 March 1945, C.Kesavan asked the Ezhava caste members of the state to join workers' struggle.¹⁵ Meanwhile the Kuttanad agricultural

13. Travancore Gazette Extraordinary, 10 August 1942, D.Dis.1571/1945/CS.

14. Ibid., 8 July 1948, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

15. Kesavan, C., Speech at Twelfth Anniversary, S.N.D.P.Yogam, Karunagapally, 31 March 1945, D.Dis.970/1945/CS.

labourers had been organised for a state-wide agitation. Labour leaders, like Kambalathu Sankupillai, P.T.Punnose, C.Kesavan and others moved among the agricultural labourers and consolidated their demands.¹⁶ In the industrial town of Alleppy labour meetings and processions became an everyday affair. On 31 January 1946 the Quilon Cashewnut Factory Workers Union had struck work, led by its president M.N.Govindan Nair.¹⁷ The Union, however, claimed that the labourers should be given three months wage as bonus. Meanwhile the attempts of the administration to settle the dispute with the Union Secretaries Chellappan and K.R.Nanoo and the president M.N.Govindan Nair failed.¹⁸ Soon the strike wave had spread to other industries in the state.

Militancy of the Labour Class

From the beginning of 1946, the labour leaders worked out their political strategy in more aggressive proportions than ever before. Since the end of the war, there took place rapid political and constitutional changes in India. The British government had announced their intention of early realisation of full self government in India. In the midst of these developments, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer announced on 16 January 1946,

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16. President, Karshaka Union, Changanacherry, 22 February 1945, Telegram to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.276/1945/CS.
 17. District Magistrate, Quilon, 2 February 1946, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.
 18. SHO, Quilon Cusba, 31 January 1946, letter to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.

a constitutional reform to be introduced shortly.¹⁹ The administration had claimed that this reform was modelled on that of the United States of America in the matter of relations between the Legislature, the executive and the judiciary.²⁰ In reality the reform made no significant departure from the constitution promulgated in 1932. Moreover, C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer sought to safeguard his position as Dewan within the monarchical set up and to put an end to the issue of responsible government. The political parties in the state had been waiting for an opportunity to rehabilitate their fortunes. The Communist Party appealed to the workers to rally under their banner to organise a struggle for terminating the dewan rule for ever. It should be noted that the Travancore police had already cautioned the administration that 'all the labourers in Alleppy numbering about 40,000 were Communists and that they were _____ led by Communist leaders like E.M.S.Namboodiripad and others.'²¹ Consequently, the workers organised processions with the slogan of 'American Model in Arabian Sea'.

By now the trade union activity in the State became active with labour strikes as a regular feature. At the seventh annual conference of the Quilon Factory Workers' Union held on 22 April 1946, both tricolour and red flags were hoisted. The

19. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.142.

20. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VI, No.6, February 1946, p.7.

21. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 13 October 1945, Copy of report to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.4200/1945/Judl.

proceedings of the conference commenced with the salute to the flag by labour volunteers, mostly red-shirts including women clad in red sarees.²² The labour conference, while expressing dissatisfaction over the new reforms, protested against the curtailment of civil liberties in the state. In fact there was a move to organise strikes in every industry. On 26 January 1946, the All Travancore Trade Union Congress organised the Strike of Alleppy workers to protest against the proposals of the Government regarding constitutional reforms.²³ Taking note of the emerging labour strikes, the Dewan had remarked that it became the habit of the labour to declare a state-wide strike when the demands of the labourers even in a particular locality were not redressed.²⁴

The Government of Travancore through their gazette on 5 February 1945 had ordered under the Defence of Travancore Rules prohibiting strikes and lockouts without notice in connection with trade disputes. It provided that 'no person employed in any undertaking shall go on strike in connection with any trade disputes without having given to his employer within one month before striking not less than fourteen days' previous notice in writing of his intention to do so.²⁵ The

22. Phone message from Sub-Inspector of Police, Quilon, 22 April 1946, D.Dis.2283/1946/Devpt.
23. Inspector of Police, Alleppy, 29 January 1946, letter to District Magistrate, Quilon, D.Dis.539/1946/Devpt.
24. Proceedings of Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly, Vol.XXVIII, No.6, 27 July 1946, pp.481-482.
25. Press Note, 3 February 1946, Government of Travancore, D.Dis.2554/1946/Devpt.

Travancore Government had extended full support to the police and magistracy in dealing with labour agitations and especially with communists.²⁶ The Labour Commissioner and the Inspector General of Police had camped at sensitive areas of labour troubles, carrying on negotiations for settlement with employers and labour union representatives.²⁷ Amidst all precautions by the administration, the labour force went ahead with their weapon of strike. In fact the militancy of the workers and their eagerness to press the strike forward appeared to have outstripped even that of the leaders to close their ranks. However in a new turn of developments of trade unionism in the state, the factory managements have now agreed that they would recognise workers' trade unions if they were properly constituted and organised on trade basis.²⁸

Early in April 1946 there were sporadic labour strikes at different parts of the state. The labourers were often found within the factory premises shouting slogans. The state's heavy handling of communist activities forced them to declare in April 1946 that they were determined to establish a national government. It was in April 1946 the central committee of the

26. Secretary to Government, Trivandrum, 5 February 1946, letter to Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.

27. Labour Commissioner, Quilon, 9 February 1946, Phonocom to Private Secretary to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.600/1946/Devpt.

28. Acting Labour Commissioner, 23 February 1946, Memorandum of Settlement to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.829/1946/Devpt.

Communist Party of India called on the provincial wing of the party to develop spontaneous struggles into local battles and to raise the question of State power.²⁹ On 5 April 1946 the labour leaders made speeches at the meeting of cashew factory workers union that they must change the present system of administration by revolution if necessary.³⁰ The administration retaliated by banning processions and the use of red flag by the workers in the State. Labour leaders like R.Sugathan and P.G.Padmanabhan were prevented from making speeches at public meetings. In this circumstances, the general council of the All India Trade Union Congress at its Nagpur Session on 20 and 21 April 1946 emphatically protested against such measures of the Travancore Government and demanded the withdrawal of all restrictions on trade union leaders and to allow free exercise of the democratic rights and liberties of the workers.³¹

On 7 August 1946 there was a general strike of coir factory workers in the Alleppy-Sherthalai area, on the alleged ground of unsatisfactory rations.³² Consequently, the Government has summoned a joint meeting of labour representatives and the

29. Isaac Thomas, T.M., 'The National Movement and Communist Party in Kerala', op.cit., p.75.

30. Travancore Police Secret Bulletin, 5 April 1946, D.Dis.394/1946/CS.

31. Resolutions passed at General Council of AITUC, Nagpur, 20 and 21 April 1946, D.Dis.1650/1946/Devpt.

32. Labour Commissioner, 26 August 1946, report to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.2567/1946/Devpt.

officers concerned on 8 August 1946 with K.R.Narayana Iyer, Director of Food Supplies, as mediator.³³ T.V.Thomas represented the labour at the joint conference. The conference had resolved that 'the existing taluk committees would be recognised and reconstituted immediately and there would be representations for the labour in the committee'. Soon a sub-committee was appointed to various places in this taluk to establish hotels where meals were served on reasonable terms and also fair price shops for storing and distributing tapioca and fish. Finally in pursuance of the settlement arrived at Alleppy, the strike was called off. When the workers resumed work on 10 August, they were delighted to realise their stamina as a class. At Punnapra this excitement caused the fishermen to form the All Travancore Coastal Workers Union in 1946. The Union was registered in accordance with the Trade Union Act in June 1946.³⁴

Organised labour all over the state started demanding annual bonus equal to one quarter of the total annual wages, including all allowances. By then the leftist labour leaders N.Sreekantan Nair, M.N.Govindan Nair and K.R.Nanoo were exciting the workers to join the strike movement. Thus under political

33. Ambalapuzha Taluk Rationing Officer, August 1946, report to Civil Supplies Commissioner, D.Dis.1318/1948/Control.

34. Professor of Marine Biology, University of Travancore, 23 August 1946, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.1515/1946/CS.

leadership, the labourers revived their militancy. The District Magistrate of Quilon had directed the police to detain the political leaders immediately in custody under the Defence of Travancore Rules. However, the frequent warnings from the Government could not stop the active trade union movement. The remarkable growth of the labour movement was that the workers now organised volunteer corps of men and women for the conduct of the strike. Interestingly, the coir factory owners of Alleppy and Sherthalai area had retaliated the labour strikes by lock-outs. They had put up notices declaring their intention even to close down their factories.³⁵

The All Travancore Trade Union Congress had guided various labour unions in their organised struggles. On 5 September 1946 the Trade Union Congress called upon the labourers to strike work in order to express their protest against the continued repressive policy of the Government on the workers and the Communists.³⁶ Though partially successful, the strike exposed to the workers the benefits of organised labour. However, the Trade Union Congress had decided to bring the bonus issue to the attention of the Travancore Mats and Matting Manufacturers' Association and the Industrial Relations Committee. Consequently, the Industrial Relations Committee discussed the bonus issue and resolved to give bonus for 1946 to the workers in two instalments, equal to 8½ per cent of one year's basic wage of coir workers.³⁷

35. Note submitted by Acting Labour Commissioner, 21 September 1946, D.Dis.2567/1946/Devpt.

36. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 22 September 1946, D.Dis.84/1946/CS.

37. Ibid., 8 July 1948, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

The rapid growth of militant labour movement under the Communist leadership had its reaction. Influential business men organised rival trade unions or supported the administration in suppressing the labourers.³⁸ At the request of factory owners, the Government posted military at the centres of labour unrest. Moreover the administration had demonstrated that they were definitely determined to deal against law-breakers with the aid of the armed police and the military.³⁹ However, the administration did not realise a struggle was brewing. There were attempts to register trade unions on communal lines like the Travancore Christian Factory Workers Union and the South Travancore Sambhavar Agriculturist Labour Union. In fact even the Labour Commissioner contempered the District Magistrate for his instructions favouring the factory owners. The Labour Commissioner had written to the administration that 'if the magistracy appear to be taking sides with the law breakers, labour was likely to be driven to desperation'.⁴⁰

Determined to put an end to the labour strikes, the Government ordered the arrest of prominent labour leaders.

38. Ibid., 20 October 1946, D.Dis.133/1948/CS.

39. Inspector General of Police, 30 September 1946, Note submitted to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.2793/1946/Devpt.

40. Labour Commissioner, Trivandrum, 27 February 1946, letter to Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.998/1946/Devpt.

Public meetings were banned for three months with effect from 7 September 1946.⁴¹ The police had trespassed into the trade union offices and threatened the labour leaders. As a mark of protest against the arrest of leaders, the factory workers of Alleppy struck work on 20 September. In a leaflet published by K.K.Kunjan, the coir workers' union had retaliated that 'the graneries of landlords and not trade union offices should be searched.' The Union exhorted for the unity of all freedom lovers to reestablish civic rights in Travancore. The Communists held a conference at Alleppy on 23 September 1946, with T.V.Thomas in the chair. It was attended by eighty three representatives for fifty five trade unions.⁴² The labour conference had resolved to submit to government a charter of nine demands relating to political and labour problems.⁴³ It included ;

- (i) the release of all political and labour prisoners,
- (ii) the removal of ban order on labour meetings,
- (iii) grant of bonus and unemployment allowance in case of no work;
- (iv) protection in old age and sickness,
- (v) reduction of working hours,

41. Inspector General of Police, 22 September 1946, fortnightly report to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.84/1946/CS.

42. Sreekantan Nair, N., Vanchikkappatta Venad, (Malayalam), Ernakulam, 1947, pp.9-10.

43. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 17 October 1946, D.Dis.732/1946/CS.

- (vi) withdrawal of military from labour centres,
- (vii) recognition of all industries,
- (viii) elected representative of the people to the
Indian Constituent Assembly, and
- (ix) end of the Dewan rule.

The workers as a class raised the demand for the establishment of an interim Government in Travancore and the election of a constituent assembly on adult franchise to decide the future constitution of the state. Meanwhile the Alleppy Coir Workers' Union had warned that the capitalists who deny labour rights and try to trouble the labourers with the help of the police and the military should face strong labour revolt. At the labour representatives' conference, P.T.Punnose, proposed a general strike to mark the beginning of the working class struggle for a Responsible Government in Travancore. The conference resolved to begin a political general strike after 13 October 1946.⁴⁴ The labour slogans had now demonstrated the confidence that official domination and the Dewan rule would terminate.

44. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.161.

Tripartite Labour Conference

The militant move of the workers invited the serious attention of the Government on labour problems. The sympathetic milieu which favoured the labour cause encouraged the workers to be hold. In retaliation the Travancore Government promulgated the Emergency Powers Act on 1 October 1946, and declared a state of emergency in the State.⁴⁵ By this Act, the Government banned strikes, hartals, processions and labour meetings. Further, the administration secured powers to confiscate property and to imprison persons involved in subversive activities. In fact the Act gave the administration absolute power over the individual and corporate life of citizens.⁴⁶ In spite of the threat from administration, the Travancore Trade Union Congress and the Communist Party jointly displayed their protest against the promulgation of the Act and threatened to observe a general strike. The Trade Union Congress had converted the demand for bonus into an all Travancore workers' issue. Noticing the turbulent stand of the labour, the Government felt the need for an effective and early settlement with the labour class.

45. Inspector General of Police, op.cit., 5 October 1946.

46. Travancore Peoples' Association, Bombay, News Bulletin, No.1, 29 October 1946, D.Dis.767/1946/CS.

The Government soon convened a Tripartite Labour Conference at the Legislative Chamber of the Government Secretariat, Trivandrum on 7 and 8 October 1946.⁴⁷ Inaugurating the Conference, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer made a plea for labour and capital to cooperate in the task of putting the industrial house of the state in order. The conference was attended by the Industrial Liaison Officer, the Inspector General of Police, the Director of Industries, Labour and Assistant Labour Commissioner representing the Government.⁴⁸ N.Sreekantan Nair and T.V.Thomas represented the workers in the Tripartite Conference. The conference was also represented by various chambers of commerce, manufacturers and employers' associations. The agenda of the conference included questions of annual bonus, holidays with pay, reduction in hours of work, fixation of minimum basic rates of wages for organised industries, labour welfare schemes, recognition of trade unions, establishment of Industrial Relations Committee for organised industries and enquiry into labour conditions in plantations.

The Dewan had maintained that the conference brought about a general agreement on all important labour questions.⁴⁹

47. Inspector General of Police, 8 July 1948, letter to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

48. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.3, November 1946, p.16.

49. Travancore Administration Report 1946-1947, p.94.

But fact was that the conference could not bring any settlement between the owners and workers. At the conference on 7 October a sub-committee was formed to go into details and to draw up definite proposals for the payment of bonus for the various industries.⁵⁰ The members of the sub-committee included the Labour Commissioner, M.L.Janardhanan Pillai, P.S.George, T.V. Thomas and N.Sreekantan Nair. However, the sub-committee reported to the conference the following resolutions:⁵¹

- (i) Bonus must be given to workers of all recognised industries,
- (ii) In no circumstances bonus should be reduced below four per cent of the total income;-
- (iii) Bonus problem must be decided by the representatives of the workers and owners concerned to the particular work or factory and
- (iv) Disputes related to bonus should be settled by a committee including Labour Commissioner, E.L.Pollard, T.V.Thomas and N.Sreekantan Nair.

The Tripartite Conference acknowledged the report of the sub-committee and resolved that "every worker in all organised industries should be given annually a lumpsum payment

50. Labour Commissioner, op.cit., 2 October 1947, D.Dis.2330/1947/Devpt.

51. Coir Factory Workers 1946-1947 Bonus, Booklet, D.Dis.346/1948/CS.

amounting to an absolute minimum of four per cent of his total earnings in the year".⁵² The Dewan had made it clear that in respect of the Government sponsored industries, bonus should be paid only on the availability of a surplus and that with respect to private concerns, the employers and the employees should evolve a formula by putting their heads together.⁵³ Under this provision, the owners refused bonus to workers. However C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer had agreed to pay four per cent bonus on the condition that the working class would cut off their relations with political parties and should support the American Model Constitution of the Dewan. In fact the Dewan was shrewd in his idea to isolate the working class movement from the National Movement.⁵⁴ But the militant and class-conscious workers had refused the offer. No wonder the Tripartite Labour Conference marked the breakdown of final efforts at a powerful settlement between the labour and the capital.

Now the Dewan warned the trade union leaders of serious consequences, if they struck work. He had asserted that 'any strike or agitation started at the instance of any political

52. Report of the Committee on Coir Mats and Matting Manufacturing Industry, D.Dis.201466/1955/Devpt.

53. Advocate General, No.LR 207, 22 August 1954, letter to Secretary to Government of Travancore, D.Dis.17151/1954/Devpt.

54. Prakasam, R., op.cit., p.162.

party as a means of labour trying to change the form of Government could not be countenanced.⁵⁵ The Dewan had insisted that so long as the present Government policy lasted, responsible government in the British sense was not going to be contemplated in Travancore. "That being clear and final", he added, "if on that basis there was going to be a general sympathetic strike, it would have to be dealt with all powers under the command of the Government". In this circumstance the Travancore Trade Union Congress met at Alleppy on 13 October 1946 and decided to observe a general strike with effect from 22 October 1946.⁵⁶ The Trade Union Congress constituted a Council of Action of five members consisting of the Communists, socialists and trade unionists to formulate the future course of action.⁵⁷ The determination of the labour force to counter the military power at last, generated a violent confrontation at Punnapra and Vayalar.

A Violent Confrontation

Labour in Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha area had for the last few years come under the influence and control of the Communist Party. When the factory workers were getting ready

55. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.3, November 1946, p.19.

56. George, K.C., Punnapra Vayalar (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1972, pp.42-43.

57. Inspector General of Police, 26 March 1948, Short note on Communist activity submitted to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.265/1948/CS.

for a direct confrontation, there occurred conflicts between workers and the landlords. At Kadakkarapally near Sherthalai, clashes occurred between the workers and the owners on 13 and 14 October, resulting the death of the owner.⁵⁸ Now the Government reacted firmly. The military that arrived at the spot raided the Coir Factory Union Office at Sherthalai, removed the Union flag, arrested leaders and assaulted the workers. In protest against this military action, the Travancore Trade Union Congress called for a sympathetic one day strike in Alleppy on 17 October 1946. It was responded by most of the labour unions.⁵⁹ Meanwhile a body of workers left for Punnapra, a coastal area five kilometres south of Alleppy, and exhorted the local fishermen to join the strike. The fishermen soon extended their support.⁶⁰ Consequently there was clash between the strikers and some pro-Government workers. The tense situation was eased only after the arrival of military.

In retaliation to the military action, the workers formed six camps to the south of Alleppy town at Punnapra, Paravur, Vandanam, Vattayal, Vattakkal and Kalarkode. Moreover in Sherthalai volunteer camps were set up at Olathala, Vayalar, Kalavancode, Menasseri, Muhamma, Kattoor, Varakadu, Mararikullam and Puthengadi. K.K.Kumaran was ^{the} supreme commander.⁶¹

58. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.149.

59. Quilon District Magistrate, 17 October 1946, Report to Registrar, Secretariat, Trivandrum, D.Dis.133/1948/CS.

60. Interview with M.N.Govindan Nair, 21 August 1984, Pattom, Trivandrum.

61. Kusuman, K.K., Punnapra Vayalar Uprising 1946, op.cit., pp.137-157.

However Vayakar was the headquarters of the volunteer training camps, which the workers called as their 'Moscow'. Each of these training centres consisted of not less than 2,000 workers. Trenches were dug in Vayalar and weapons like stakes of arecanut trees and sharp granite pieces were collected and got ready. The Communist leaders formed concentration camps in different places and armed themselves to attack the police and military.⁶² The workers were taught to lie flat during any firing. The Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers Union office was the nerve centre of the organised labour movement. It was surprise that there were courts within the camps to try and let off relenting labourers on the promise that they would cooperate with the struggle.⁶³

The Government had by now branded this as an 'organised insurrection' and ordered repressive measures to put down the brewing struggle. They have mobilised police and military to the taluks of Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha. On 19 October 1946 the Government declared the Fish Workers' Union at Alleppy and Punnapra, the Sherthalai Coir Factory Workers Union, the Travancore Communist Party and all bodies connected with it as unlawful associations.⁶⁴ The administration declared as illegal

62. Administrative Report, Police Department, Part III, 1947, R.Dis.2429/1948/Judl.

63. Inspector General of Police, 21 December 1946, Report to the Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.11/1947/CS.

64. Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary, 19 October 1946.

nearly sixty labour unions affiliated to the Communist Party.⁶⁵ Moreover the leading landlords of Sherthalai met at the local Tourist Bungalow on 19 October 1946 and made plans to set fire to the houses of labour leaders and to organise rowdies.⁶⁶

Following the ban of the Travancore Trade Union Congress and the Communist Party, a general strike was declared on 22 October 1946 which continued the next day too, the birthday of Sri Chitra Tirunal, the Maharajah of Travancore.⁶⁷ An underground movement had also taken its direction mainly from the Malabar Communist Party leaders. There was always the danger of their communist brethren from across the border participating in the movement directly. Communist leaders P.Krishnapillai, A.K.Gopalan, E.M.S.Namboodiripad, K.C.George, P.Gangadharan, P.T.Punnose, C.G.Sivadasan and others toured the area, imparting marxism to the labourers.⁶⁸ The general strike marked the beginning of an agitation at Sherthalai, Vayalar and Alleppy where buses and boats carrying rice proved convenient targets. As a precautionary measure, the Travancore Police cut off communication by backwaters against the landing of Communists in the State. Only bonafide passengers were allowed

65. Inspector General of Police, *op.cit.*, 11 October 1947, D.Dis.138/1948/CS.

66. Kusuman, K.K., 'Punnapra-Vayalar Uprising 1946', *op.cit.*, pp.137-157.

67. Quilon District Magistrate, 22 October 1946, Report to Administrative Secretary to Dewan, Travancore, D.Dis.139/1948/CS.

68. Kusuman, K.K., *op.cit.*, pp.137-157.

to cross the backwaters. Armed police had patrolled the backwaters day and night.⁶⁹

On 24 October, there was a clash between the Reserve Police and the workers at Punnapra. A party of processionists, trained and equipped with wooden spears, axes and locally available weapons, made a planned attack on a police party encamped in a house at Punnapra.⁷⁰ In the attack police Sub-Inspector Velayudha Nadar, a head constable and two constables who were in charge of the police camp were murdered.⁷¹ On 25 October the administration promulgated martial law in Sherthalai and Ambalapuzha taluks. The army under the command of Major General V.N.Parameswaran Pillai took charge of the situation.⁷² At the turn of events, Dewan C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer took over the direct command of the State Forces to coordinate the civil and military authorities.⁷³ He adopted stern measures to put down the revolt. However, the revolting labourers cut telephone and telegraphic wires and demolished bridges and small culverts. In return the State Forces opened fire at the labourers, killing a number of rioters. The number of persons died in the fight,

69. D.S.P., Kottayam, 13 December 1946, letter to Inspector General of Police, D.Dis.283/1948/Judl.

70. Travancore Police Daily Report, No.298, 25 October 1946, D.Dis.466/1947/CS.

71. Report of Administration, Police Department, 1947, Part I, D.Dis.2429/1948/Judl.

72. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.4, December 1946, p.44.

73. The Hindu, 26 October 1946, p.6.

however, vary between Government and private reports.⁷⁴

In Sherthalai, there was a violent confrontation between the military and the rioting workers. On 27 October a military detachment raided the labour camps at Olathala and Menasserri. On the same day military advanced to Vayalar, employing motor boats. Surrounded by swamps and sea, Vayalar was not easily accessible and was made a major centre of the Communist volunteers. In a bold confrontation, the mob of armed rioters numbering more than a thousand, daringly faced the military.⁷⁵ In a fierce fighting the military resorted to firing, which took many lives of the workers at the spot.⁷⁶ The administration had maintained that from all information to them, only about 190 persons were killed throughout the struggle in the firing by the military and the police.⁷⁷

The punitive action taken by the Travancore Police and the declaration of martial law confined the movement to the Punnapra and Vayalar area and did not allow the struggle to spread to other centres of the State. The practically

74. George, K.C., op.cit., p.140.

75. The Hindu, 30 October 1946, p.6.

76. Daniel, D., op.cit., p.153.
The fact that when the enquiry committee of the State Congress reported the death roll as ninety four, K.C.George, a leading organiser of the struggle put it as more than a hundred and fifty. (George, K.C., op.cit., p.155.). The police had burnt many dead bodies by pouring petrol on them, in order to reduce the number. (Vanaja Rengaswami, op.cit., pp.213-215.)

77. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.5, January 1947, p.7.

complete absence of agitation in other parts of the State enabled the Government to concentrate on the trouble spots and to quell the agitation within days. As a result of stern military action, most of the prominent Communist leaders went underground. The State Congress, however, did not support the agitation and a section of Congress leaders came out even openly against the uprising.⁷⁸ Immediately after the Vayalar revolt, leaders dispersed the camps and T.V.Thomas, president of the All Travancore Trade Union Congress, appealed to the labourers to resume work. With the rounding up of the Communist leaders and other strikers, the labourers resumed work. Now the administration maintained that the Communist menace in the state was halted.⁷⁹ Since the situation was getting normal, the administration withdrew the martial law with effect from 10 November 1946.⁸⁰ The Dewan, however, took full responsibility and blame for the military action which he said had been taken deliberately as he had seen no point in going piecemeal. He had described the incidents at Punnapra and Vayalar as an 'organised insurrection' by a section of the public, especially the younger generation, with the help of the State Communist Party.⁸¹

78. Daniel, D., op.cit., pp.155-156.

79. Report of Administration, Police Department, 1947, Part III, R.Dis.2429/1948/Judl.

80. Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary, 8 November 1946.

81. Travancore Information and Listener, Vol.VII, No.4, December 1946, p.46.

It is a remarkable fact that while the General Strike of 1938 revealed the class solidarity of the workers, the Punnapra Vayalar Revolt has proved their militancy in the class struggle. Indeed the revolt set an example to the Indian Working Class. As K.C.George had described, the revolt formed a significant scene in the long fight organised under the leadership of the Communist Party and the organised labourers for the achievement of responsible government and to end the Dewan rule.⁸² In his report to the Dewan of Travancore, the Inspector General of Police had stated that "it was the irresponsible and misled of the labour movement by the Communists that has committed the mishappenings and the consequent suppression".⁸³ But Travancore State Congress took an altogether independent line. While the State Congress warned the Government against repression and the declaration of the martial law, it had deplored the violent methods adopted by a section of labour under the guidance of Communist leadership. In fact the Communists had claimed their positive role in the struggle.⁸⁴ The State Congress too expressed itself on the side of the labour to whom it appealed to free themselves from the Communist leadership who were

82. George, K.C., op.cit., p.185.

83. Inspector General of Police, 21 December 1946, report to Dewan of Travancore, D.Dis.11/1947/CS.

84. Ranadive, B.T., "The Role Played by Communists in the Freedom Struggle of India", Social Scientist, Vol.12, No.9, September 1984, pp.31-32.

responsible for their troubles. The Dewan characterised the attitude of the State Congress as unhelpful and obstructive.⁸⁵ Nevertheless George Woodcock is right in his remark that the memory of the battles at Punnapra and Vayalar still arises strong feelings in Travancore.⁸⁶ The Travancore working class, making a common cause with the political leadership for the first time boldly confronted with the administrative machinery. However, in order to end the Communist power and to restore peace, the Government ruthlessly put down the labour force.

85. The Hindu, 31 October 1946, p.6.

86. George Woodcock, op.cit., p.248.