CHAPTER IV

THE INDUSTRIAL WORKING CLASS AND THE CONGRESS MINISTRY, 1937-1939

A.

The Congress election campaign generated a new enthusiasm and awareness among the industrial working class of the Madras presidency as in the rest of India. The election manifesto of the Congress promised the following benefits to industrial workers: a decent standard of living along with better working conditions, suitable machinery for the settlement of disputes between employers and workmen, protection against the consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment, the right of workers to form unions and to strike for the protection of their interests.\(^1\) The formation of Congress Ministry in Madras under the 1935 Act on 14 July 1937 following the resolution of the working committee of National Congress giving permission to accept office\(^2\) heralded

\(^1\) F.No.6(I)1936; F.No.6(II)1936. AICC Papers.

Note: Congress election manifesto was passed by the AICC at its meeting held in Bombay on 23-8-36.

The New Age, Jan. 1938, NMM&L.


The Hindu, 8 July 1937 and 10 July 1937.
a new era in the working class movement in the Madras presidency.

The intense industrial unrest consequent on the worsening economic conditions of the working class during the Depression and the recession of the 1930s and the changed political and ideological context made it necessary for the Madras Congress ministry to seriously consider passing of fresh labour legislation. There was also the urge to redeem the election promises of making pro-labour legislation.

The Congress Labour Committee which met at Calcutta in October 1937 recommended measures to be taken by the Congress ministries for the improvement of the conditions of the industrial working class. Most important of these was the recommendation concerning the recognition of those trade unions by the state and the employer which accepted a policy of "using peaceful and legitimate means." Babu Rajendra Prasad (as a member of the Parliamentary Committee of the Congress) was quoted as having stated the outlines on which the Congress ministries were to legislate for industrial workers. "So long as the Congress is not in full power",

he said, "it must adopt the line of ameliorative programmes by way of bettering the conditions of the masses. To embark on radical programmes till that power is achieved is hazardous. It will introduce class conflicts which would be harmful to the national movement in more ways than one." 4

The cautious views of Rajendra Prasad were in conformity with those of Congress ministry in Madras presided over by C. Rajagopalachary, a right wing leader of the National Congress, as Prime Minister and V.V. Giri, a moderate working class leader, as the Minister for Industries and Labour. V.V. Giri, addressing the workers in March 1938 in Madras, stated that the Congress was pledged to work for the amelioration of the workers' condition in accordance with the Karachi Resolution on Fundamental Rights, and that the Congress government in Madras would also work toward that ideal. 5

After waiting for a few months, the working class organisations in Madras began to press the demand for fresh labour legislation. 6 Thousands of industrial

5. G.O.No.1289, Dev. Dept., 19-5-39, TNA.
workers belonging to various organisations led demonstrations in March 1938 in Madras city to draw the attention of the Legislative Assembly to this demand. The growing demand for labour legislation from the working class organisations, the intense industrial unrest, and the Congress government's concern for maintaining industrial peace hastened the process of fresh labour legislation. On 22 April 1938, V.V. Giri held tripartite conference of the representatives of workers, employers and the government to discuss the subject.

The draft proposals evolved by the Congress government in this regard covered three aspects: unemployment assistance, settlement of trade disputes and the recognition of trade unions.

The proposed measure of unemployment assistance comprised three parts. Under the first part, any


10. G.O.No.2053, Dev. Dept., 22-8-38, TNA.
capitalist employing more than 10 workers throughout the year would be asked to submit to the government through a prescribed authority an account of statistics regarding employment and unemployment. This was to gather information on the employment situation in various industries in the presidency. The second part sought to constitute free public employment exchanges with advisory bodies representing the organisations of the capitalists and the workers. The third part was intended to enable the Government to require any capitalist coming under the Act "to contribute a sum equivalent to one-quarter anna for each worker employed per day and in addition to recover from the wages of the workers a like sum for contribution to a fund to be created for the purpose of unemployment assistance." The government would be free to add to the contribution of the capitalists and workers with a view to strengthen the financial foundation of the fund. The third part also covered aspects like the schedule of benefits, the maximum period for payment of benefits, the category of workers eligible for the payments.

On the aspect of the settlement of trade disputes, it was proposed "to make it unlawful to declare a strike

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
or lock-out in respect of any trade dispute relating to interpretation or alleged breach of any term of agreement." 13 It was also explained that the intention of the government in this regard was to constitute a machinery to which all the unsettled trade disputes would be referred for a binding decision. It was proposed that a recognised trade union was entitled to make reference of a dispute to a court of enquiry or a conciliation board on its agreeing to deposit a sum at the rate of one rupee per member to be forfeited to the court of enquiry or the conciliation board at its discretion if the complaint was proved to be "vexatious or frivolous". 14

On the aspect of the recognition of a trade union, it was proposed to protect 'bonafide' trade unions having a prescribed minimum membership and abiding by the rules framed by the government by granting them the privileges which a recognised trade union should possess. 15 Speaking at Calicut in October 1937, V.V. Giri defined Congress government's stand on working class organisations. He clearly stated that the Congress government "stood for

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
organization on sound trade union lines of workers, which was as much in the interests of the workers as in those of capitalists themselves."^16 He further stated his views more clearly while explaining the draft proposals of the legislation at the Tripartite conference on 22 April 1938 in Madras. He said that the workers and the capitalists were the real and effective partners for all purposes in industry and that industrial progress could not be achieved without the co-operation of the two. While he recognized the right of the workers to strike and that of the capitalist to lock out, he wanted them to use these rights only as a last resort.^17 V.V. Giri also declared that he believed in 'the spirit of negotiation' between the capitalists and the workers and in 'internal settlement' rather than the 'external settlement'. He felt that intervention of the government should only be sought when all other means of settlement had failed. He also emphasized the 'conciliation method' rather than 'arbitration'.^18 Explaining the role of unemployment assistance, he said it would enable the worker "not to get

17. G.O. No. 2053, Dev. Dept., 22-8-38, TNA.
18. Ibid.
demoralized and become useless for further employment if he is thrown in the streets at any time". Strikes, he said, were in some measure due to abject poverty and unemployment.  

The Congress government circulated the draft proposals on labour legislation to the representatives of the capitalist and the working class organisations to elicit their views. Regarding unemployment assistance, the Southern India Chamber of Commerce in its letter to the government on 20 April 1938 felt that "the crying need of the day is not so much relief of partial unemployment amongst industrial workers as a relief of general unemployment amongst the masses as well as the educated classes; the question of temporary unemployment among industrial workers has not yet appeared as a problem for statesman to tackle." Contrary to the view held by the government it argued that the unemployment fund would demoralize the workers leading to greater absenteeism, insubordination and vagrancy. On the question of supplying statistics on employment and unemployment by those employing more than 10 workers it believed it to be an unnecessary responsibility imposed upon the employers.

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
On the benefits to be distributed, it was felt that the bill was lacking in detail. It further recommended that the provision regarding the unemployment fund should be implemented selectively choosing the best organized industries. It also suggested that the scheme should be limited to industries employing 100 workers and the benefits restricted to the contributors alone. It also suggested that the contribution of the workers and employers should be one pie per worker per day instead of 3 pies per workers. On the question of the recognition of a trade union, it suggested that only a trade union representing 50% of the workers of the industry should be recognized. On the settlement of trade disputes it wanted that the proposed arbitration board should be representative and authoritative consisting of one representative of the employer, one of the workers and one of the government, the last being a member of the judiciary. The decision of the majority of such a board would be authoritative and should be accepted.21

The management of Vasanta Mills, Coimbatore, argued that the proposal of unemployment assistance in the textile industry was "next to impossible" and would seriously

21. Ibid.
handicap the industry which was of very recent origin.\textsuperscript{22} It further suggested that any such legislation should be on an All India basis. Regarding contribution to the unemployment assistance fund, it explained that 3 pies per worker per day would work out to be nearly Rs.7,500/- per year which would be a considerable portion of its wages bill, and would only go to increase the cost of production to that extent.\textsuperscript{23} It recommended that the basis for recognizing a trade union should be the representation of a "reasonable majority" of the workers in the factory. It wanted a provision to be made in the proposed legislation giving the employer "full liberty" to enforce a lock-out when necessitated for reasons of "trade depression, absence of demand, etc."	extsuperscript{24}

The state-owned and company-managed M&SM Railway Company and S.I. Railway Company generally disagreed with most of the provisions in the proposed legislation. They also argued that they should be exempted from the operation of the legislation because any matter concerning the railways had to be on all India basis. The Agent of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
M&SM Railway observed that "such legislation if enacted at all should be enacted at the centre, and that in any event this company should be exempted from the provisions of such provincial legislation as the company operates not only in the Madras and Bombay presidencies but in two major Indian states also."\(^{25}\) The S.I. Railway Company Ltd. management maintained the same stand as that of the M&SM Railway Co.\(^{26}\) It suggested that the trade unions should be accorded recognition only if they were 'properly constituted' and conducted on 'constitutional lines'.\(^{27}\)

The Madras Chamber of Commerce and several other Associations stressed that the industrial workers should be "guided and instructed by Government," as their level of education was very low. They also felt that 50% membership of workers in a factory was necessary for recognizing a union. They also suggested that only trade unions run on "peaceful and legitimate methods" should be given recognition. On the other hand, trade

\(^{25}\) Ibid. Letter from Ag. Agent, M&SM Railway Company Ltd. to the Secy to Govt. Dev. Dept., Madras, 12 May, 1938.

\(^{26}\) Ibid. Letter from the Agent, South India Railway Company Ltd. to the Secretary to Govt. of Madras, Dev. Dept., Madras, 2 June 1938.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
unions encouraging "class war in any form" or encourag-
ing or countenancing subversion "directly or indirectly" should not be recognized. Also any breach in the condi-
tions of recognition should be followed by loss of recogni-
tion for a period of at least twelve months. All capitalist associations made it clear that they were opposed to compulsory arbitration as it was against the very spirit of the labour legislation. They wanted that any strike or lock-out within one year of the signing of an agreement for purposes other than implementation of the agreement should be declared illegal. They also wanted the strikes or lock-outs during the course of conciliation proceedings to be declared illegal.

The Southern India Millowners' Association, Coimbatore, argued that compulsory arbitration would not prove to be a healthy procedure in the long run. It too recommended a 50% minimum membership for recognition of any trade union. It felt that the unemployment assistance scheme would greatly retard the growth of industry. The Secretary of Andhra Chamber of

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. Letter from General Secretary, Southern India Millowners' Association, Coimbatore to the Secretary, Dev. Dept., Madras, 28 June 1939, TNA.
Commerce stressed the necessity for labour legislation on an all India basis as lack of uniformity in labour legislation would have the effect of unsettling industry and commerce and dislocating business in Andhra.\textsuperscript{31}

The working class organizations generally welcomed the move of the Congress government, but they had strong disagreement on certain provisions of the proposed legislation. The Madras Labour Union, while welcoming the proposal for constitution of unemployment assistance, severely criticized the scheme as deficient in certain details. It wanted that the contribution of the worker to the unemployment fund must be in proportion to his income and not a flat rate and unemployment benefit must also be in the same proportion. It also criticized as "preposterous" the stand of the government that it was "free to contribute or not" to the fund.\textsuperscript{32} The Union further felt that the draft proposals on the settlement of trade disputes, recognition of a trade union and unemployment assistance were "inadequate, unsatisfactory and disappointing".\textsuperscript{33} It observed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid. Letter from the Secretary, the Andhra Chamber of Commerce Ltd. to the Secretary to Govt. of Madras, Dev. Dept., 28 June 1939, TNA.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
that "the only policy that emerges from them is the prevention of strikes and settlement of disputes between capital and labour. This is purely meant in the interests of Government and not of workmen. The question underlying all causes of disputes have not been raised nor answered.... The various devices of legislation can prevent, a doubtful point, the symptom but cannot cure the deep-rooted diseases... The mentality behind this is distinctly bourgeois."\(^{34}\)

The South Indian Railway Employees' Union and M&SM Railway Employees' Union, while welcoming the government's move to enact labour legislation, wanted that its provisions should be so framed as to safeguard the interests of the workers and their organizations. Regarding the fee for moving the arbitration board, the S.I. Railway Employees' Union suggested, a fixed low sum as deposit to be returnable, if the complaint of the trade union was proved to be correct, instead of a sum at the rate of one rupee per member.\(^{35}\) It opposed compulsory arbitration. Regarding recognition a trade union, the Union wanted unconditional recognition to be

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) G.O.No.2053, Dev. Dept., 22-8-38. Letter from South India Railway Workers' Union to the Secretary to Govt., Dev. Dept., Madras, 18 April 1938, TNA.
given to a trade union if it possessed a prescribed minimum membership. It also suggested that arbitrary cancellation of a trade union registration must be stopped; this should be done only under exceptional circumstances.\footnote{Ibid.} As far as the unemployment assistance scheme was concerned, the union approved the proposal of the government to get periodical returns from industry, to constitute free public employment exchanges, to recover one quarter anna for each worker from the employer and a like sum from the wages of the workers for unemployment assistance and the addition of a contribution by the Government and other proposals in connection with the assistance to the unemployed workers.\footnote{Ibid.}

The M&SM Railway Employees' Union emphasized that industrial labour was entitled to protective legislation and state aid for a proper and healthy development of the trade union movement in Madras presidency. It blamed the Congress government for its "halting attitude in bringing forward protective legislation."\footnote{Ibid. Letter from M&SM Railway Employees' Union to V.V. Giri, Minister for Industry & Labour, 10 Dec. 1938.}
Madras Press Labour Union welcomed the principle that a trade union must be recognized. However, it wanted that no prescribed minimum membership be insisted upon and that no new rules be framed for the same.\(^{39}\) It also demanded that unions registered under the Trade Union Act of 1926 should be accorded the same status which was contemplated in the draft proposals of the government. It also stated that the right of free functioning of a trade union must also be included as part of the recognition of a trade union.\(^{40}\) While the Union agreed with the principle of amicable settlement of all trade disputes without resorting to strikes, it questioned the practicality of the settlement of trade disputes peacefully in the absence of the existence of minimum living and working conditions such as minimum wages, paid holidays, and grant of 15 days casual leave and sick leave with half pay in a year.\(^{41}\) It agreed to the constitution of machinery for settlement of disputes but it emphasized the fundamental right of the workers to strike.\(^{42}\) Supporting the scheme of unemployment assistance, the Union sought clarification on the

\(^{39}\) Ibid. The Madras Press Labour Union, 20-4-38. Minutes of the meeting held on 17 & 18 April 1938.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
question of minimum wages under the scheme. It argued that "in any event no worker drawing wages of either Rs.10/- per mensem or below can contribute towards the above fund." 43

In early 1939, in their memorandum, the M&SM Railway Employees' Union, Madras Press Labour Union, India Leaf Tobacco Development Company Workers' Union, Madras Kerosene Oil Workers' Union, Madras Labour Union, P.W.D. Workshop Workers' Union and Dhanushkodi Port Trust Workers' Union stated that, while they endorsed the Government's approach to the resolution of industrial conflict, they urged the government to incorporate various other provisions in the proposed labour legislation which would basically preserve the rights of the working class organizations and protect the interests of the workers from capitalist attacks. On unemployment assistance, the memorandum stated that the scheme must be made applicable to all industries and no retrenchment should be affected without prior consultation with the recognized union. It also wanted that the rate of contribution from workers getting below Rs.20 should be halved and that for workers getting below Rs.10 no contribution should be collected. 44

43. Ibid.

44. G.O.No.1380, Dev. Dept., 27-5-39, TNA.
While the capitalists viewed the proposed labour legislation with apprehension, the British government tended to consider the bill as being too radical in character. Erskine, the Governor of Madras presidency, in his correspondence with Linlithgow, the Governor-General, observes: "You will note that it is of a somewhat extreme character, nor do I think it is in any way likely that the employers will agree to most of its provisions as to do so would really be to hand over the conduct of their business to very inefficient trade unions which at present exist in this part of India."45 Linlithgow in reply observed: "As regards Giri's Bill, Clow entirely agreed that if legislation of this type is pursued it may have grave effects. He commented that it was certainly a more extreme production than Giri's normal conversation would lead to one to expect."46

The proposed labour legislation was not made into law. Though V.V. Giri, the Labour Minister, was anxious to do so,47 his efforts could not get materialized as he tried to accommodate the interests of both the parties,

46. Linlithgow to Erskine, 11 May 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Vol.No.65, NMM&L.
i.e., the capitalists and the workers. He observed in the course of his speech on the subject of labour legislation during the Budget Session of the Madras Legislative Assembly in March 1939: "No doubt, there may be a feeling among the industrialists that the Government are biased in their outlook towards labour. And, equally, there may be a feeling on the part of the workers that we are biased towards industrialists. But, I am bound to deny these charges. I stand for industry which is both for labour and capital. I am for adjustment of their difficulties and differences as between them, so that the industry may thrive to the mutual advantage of both." Later in the labour conference held on 29 June 1939, he stated that "the bill will be in the interests of everybody."

The Congress government's emphasis on accommodating the interests of both capital and labour and the intense industrial conflicts between 1937 and 1939, which perhaps left little time for the Congress government to evolve a comprehensive labour legislation, substantially contributed to the failure to enact any labour legislation in Madras presidency during the period 1937-39.

48. G.O.No.2198, Dev. Dept., 8-9-39, TNA.
49. Ibid.
A legislative measure concerning the regulation of working hours in the industries of Madras presidency was proposed by the Congress government in February 1938. The proposal sought to introduce an 8 hour work day in all the industries without reduction in workers wages and within a maximum time spread of 13 hours. While the employers' associations staunchly opposed the proposal as it would seriously reduce their profits, the working class organizations favoured the proposal and wanted it to be introduced immediately.

The Members of the Employers Federation of South India and Madras Chamber of Commerce in their letter to the Commissioner of Labour on 24 March 1938 observed that "it is too soon to conclude that such measures are ideal.... When rural uplift is the first need of the times it will be a mistake to enforce measures which must handicap factory employers, or raise prices to the consumer...." They strongly believed that the proposed legislation was "bound to discourage the development of industry in Madras."

50. G.O.No.1861, Dev. Dept., 1-8-39, TNA.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
The working class organizations, on the other hand, argued that the proposal to shorten the working hours would help increase the total production in industry. For instance, the Madras Labour Union in its letter, dated 22 March 1938, observed: "As regards the monthly wage earners, the experience of union has been that total production of these people are now more than what it was in 10 hour day". It, therefore, recommended that "the hours of work for day and night work should be 8 and 6 respectively."53

However, this measure met the same fate as that of the earlier one and was not passed into law.

The Congress government also considered a proposal to provide relief from indebtedness to industrial workers by enacting legislation. The proposal to enact a legislation similar to that of the Central Provinces Adjustment and Liquidation of Industrial Workers' Debt Act 1936 was mooted by the ministry in December 1937.54 According to the proposal, a worker whose debts exceeded his assets plus three month's wages could apply to set the law in motion. The court after investigating the case could determine the extent to which the amount

53. Ibid.
54. G.O.No.2775, Dev. Dept. (MS), 14-11-39, TNA.
was to be repaid and the time limit that was to be allowed for repayment. The amount of the workers' wages to be repaid could vary from one-sixth to one-third and the payment period might extend over 36 months.\textsuperscript{55}

V.V. Giri wanted that the proposal should also include the agricultural workers. In his note of 15 June 1938, he stated that the proposal "should be made applicable to agricultural workers as well."\textsuperscript{56} He further observed on 6 February 1939 that "this is neither a novel measure nor will it surprise anybody. The industrial worker is at the mercy of the Kabuli moneylender. This legislation is long overdue. The C.P. Government introduced a measure in 1935.... I will be glad to see that we undertake this measure at the earliest. There can't be any opposition to this.... I therefore desire that this measure should be made ready...without any delay."\textsuperscript{57} C. Rajagopalachary, contrary to the view held by V.V. Giri, observed on 7 February 1939 that there was no need for the time being to undertake any fresh legislation on the subject.\textsuperscript{58} Thus the

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
proposal was stalled.

Yet another proposal, which was not made into legislation but was seriously considered, related to introduction of weekly payment of wages in all the industries as this would have an important impact on the welfare of the workers. While V.V. Giri suggested introduction of fortnightly payment of wages, C. Rajagopalachary favoured weekly payment of wages because he thought that it would reduce borrowing and drinking among the workers. This proposal also met the same fate as that of other proposals.

A significant step which was given concrete shape by the Congress government was the amendment made to the Madras Maternity Benefit Act, 1935 to remove the gaps in the existing Act. V.V. Giri, while introducing the Bill on 3 April 1939 stated that out of 24 mills in Coimbatore "13 mills employing 2,000 women paid no benefit at all during 1936 and 9 mills employing over 1,500 women paid no benefit during 1937."  

60. Madras Legislative Assembly Debates (henceforth MLAD), Vol.XII, March to May 1939, p.247, TNA.
According to the amended Bill, a woman industrial worker employed in any factory or factories of the same employer was entitled to maternity benefits if she had worked for "not less than 240 days within a period of one year immediately preceding the date on which she gives notice under sub-section (1) of section 6." 61

Further, to protect women workers from arbitrary dismissals by the employers, the amendment was made to the effect that a woman worker should not be dismissed "five months before her confinement" instead of "three months before her confinement." 62

The Congress government introduced the Prohibition Bill in the Legislative Assembly on 25 September 1937 and it was passed into a law. 63 Gandhi wanted that it was in industrial areas that the prohibition programmes must be implemented. 64 But the Madras Government first applied Prohibition Act in Salem which was not a very much industrialized area on 1 October 1937. The prohibition programme was primarily designed to eradicate the evil of drinking among the poorer section of the society

61. Ibid., p.248.
62. Ibid., p.249.
including the industrial workers and to improve their health.

To enforce the prohibition programme, non-official prohibition committees were formed to assist the officials. New village vigilance committees for the purpose were also formed and those in existence were firmly strengthened.\(^65\) The loss of revenue for the government in the beginning was estimated to be around 34 lakhs in 1937.\(^66\) The prohibition programme became a complete success with all the toddy shops in Salem closed.\(^67\) The defect of the Congress government prohibition programme was that it was introduced in a less industrialized district and therefore it could not, by its very nature, touch the major chunk of industrial workers.

The observation of the Collector and District Magistrate of Salem on the working of the Prohibition Act in nine months between October 1937 and June 1938 is of some interest: "The most noticeable effects of prohibition on the lives of the people are the absence of street brawls and family squabbles, improvement in the food-

\(^{65}\) Report on the Administration of Madras presidency, 1936-37, TNA.

\(^{66}\) PL-3/1937, AICC Papers.

supply, particularly at the evening meal, increased care for cleanliness and the children's welfare, reduct-
ion in indebtedness and generally a more hopeful out-
look." The non-official reports of the working of 
the Prohibition Act in Salem submitted to the Govern-
ment by C. Jagannathachary of the Department of Economics, Annamalai University, and by a number of research 
students under the direction of Dr. P.J. Thomas, head 
of the Department of Economics, Madras University, 
also concluded that the prohibition programme had proved 
a success.

Just one year after, encouraged by the success of Salem experiment, the Congress government introduced the prohibition programme in the districts of Chittoor and Cuddapah. According to the Collector and District Magistrates of the two districts the programme proved a success here too.

It would be pertinent to note what V.V. Giri had to say on the broad perspective of labour legislation


69. Ibid., pp.235-36.

70. Ibid., pp.236-37.
by the government. He said during the budget session of the Madras Legislative Assembly in March 1939:

I am thinking in terms of development of India's industries on a large scale so that the workers can find more employment. I am thinking in terms of housing for industrial workers. I am thinking in terms of unemployment benefits during times of industrial unemployment. I am thinking in terms of relieving industrial workers from Kabuli money-lenders. I am thinking in terms of greater security of service for workers. I am thinking in terms of saving workers from the demon of drink and we are considering immediate measures, even apart from the complete prohibition we may later have. I am thinking in terms of better wage conditions for workers thus and even more can be done so long as there is harmony between the workers and the employers. 71

B.

The years between 1937 and 1939 represented a remarkable growth in the working class movement. There were 68 strikes during the year 1937 in various industries of Madras presidency followed by 54 strikes in 1938 and 31 strikes in 1939. 72

71. G.O.No.2198, Dev. Dept., 8-9-39, TNA,
The phenomenal rise in working class unrest had a very strong and direct reference to the changed political context and the economic difficulties of the working class. Also the relaxation in the government's repression following the Congress government's coming to power and creation of relatively free psychological atmosphere for the articulation of workers' grievances, the growth of left ideas and the rising expectations of the working class, all contributed to the growth in the level of consciousness of the workers and militancy among them.

The rising militancy of the working class compelled the Congress ministry to delineate its policy in the matter of industrial conflict. In a press communiqué, dated 22 October 1937, it outlined its industrial relations' policy as follows:

It does not help the interests of labour to resort to strikes without prior representation and negotiations. The Government strongly disapproves of strikes when all other available methods of representation have not been exhausted...the declared policy of the Government is that 'internal settlement' is preferable to 'external settlement' of trade disputes. The Government desire to point out that major issues giving rise to any strikes are jeopardized by side issues that always arise out of any hasty resort to direct action. The Government would much desire that there should be no disturbance of the
industrial organization of the province and appeal for harmonious co-operation between labour and industrial managers; and that workers who should have every confidence in the government may not resort to strikes unless the issues are very grave and even then not until every other possible way out has been tried.73

The Congress government's labour policy was circumscribed by three parameters: strikes as a last resort; internal settlement in preference to external settlement; class harmony or peaceful co-existence of classes. It repeatedly emphasized that strikes by industrial workers should be resorted to only as the last means. Because by frequent resort to industrial strikes, the workers would not only hurt their interests but also handicap industrial development. By emphasizing the concept of internal settlement in preference to external settlement, the Congress government envisaged for itself the role of middleman in the settlement of industrial disputes, a view which was entirely different from the laissez-a-faire policy of the British government. The concept of peaceful co-existence of classes or class harmony so long as the anti-imperialist struggle was being waged was a cardinal principle of the National Congress which was

incorporated in the Congress government's labour policy.

This labour policy found reflection in the Congress ministry's attitude toward the industrial strikes in several industries in various parts of Madras presidency. While moderate leadership endorsed this policy, the left working class leadership sharply differed with it. This difference created points of friction between the left leadership and the Congress government which found full expression during the strikes led by the left leaders.

The similarity of views and approach established a kind of dialogue and interaction between the Congress government and the moderate working class leadership. S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu, an influential leader from Madurai and Papanasam, stressed the advantages of negotiation over strikes and violence as weapons for workers. Also he often warned the workers against socialist based on propaganda of class struggle and violence. He advised them to have confidence in the Congress ministry and to support the Congress. Speaking at M&SM Railway

74. F.No.18/1/39, Home Dept. Poll., Fortnightly Report, Jan. 1939, NAI.

75. G.O.No.2362, Dev. Dept., 22-9-38, TNA.
G.O.No.448, Dev. Dept., 21-2-38, TNA.
Letter No.2066, Dev. Dept., 24-8-38, TNA.
Workers' Union on 21 January 1938, Dr. P. Varadarajulu Naidu stressed that welfare of the people depended upon close co-operation between capitalists and workers. 76 Similarly, in early 1938 G. Chelvapathy Chetty warned the workers of the consequence of hastiness in going on strikes and of the growing influence of the left radicals. 77

The Congress government with its emphasis on the growth of moderate trade union movement and its preference for moderate trade union leaders as against the left radicals, generally tended to support those working class struggles which were by and large conducted non-violently under the leadership of moderate working class leaders. Interesting examples in this regard were the strikes in Madurai and Papanasam textile mills of the Harveys in 1938.

We have analyzed in the second chapter in detail the protests of industrial workers in several industries in various parts of Madras presidency during 1937 and 1939 in order to understand the level of consciousness of the industrial workers. The textile industry, as a

76. Letter No.514, Dev. Dept., 2-3-38, TNA.
77. G.O.No.1096, Dev. Dept., 26-4-38, TNA.
more organized industry had experienced severe industrial
cflicts during the Congress ministry period. It was
also during this period that moderate working class
leadership was consolidating its influence with the
assistance, in some cases, of the Congress government.

The textile workers of Madurai and Papanasam mills
went on a general strike in the month of January 1938
under the leadership of S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu over
various long-pending demands of the workers. The imme-
diate cause was the suspension of a labour "volunteer"
on ground of indiscipline. The mill was closed. The
strike received sympathy and solidarity from the workers
of Madura, Meenakshi, Mahalakshmi and Raja Mills.
It also received support from the local Congress leaders.
The stubbornness of the British capitalist was met with
equally matching determination of the workers. Massive
and organized propaganda work was undertaken by the
workers. The Madura Mill management without any settle-
ment with the workers put up a notice to the effect that
the mills would be opened on 20 April 1938. This intransi-
sigent move of the Harveys evoked an unusual and histori-
cally significant response from the Congress government

78. G.O.No.904, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., 28-5-38, TNA.
79. Ibid.
which wanted a settlement to be reached before the opening of the mills. The Congress government took the "unusual" step of imposing Section 144 of the Cr. P.C. against the British capitalist, much against the wishes of the Governor of Madras presidency and Governor-General in Council. This stern measure of the Congress government brought the strike finally to an end. By and large non-violent course of the strike under the leadership of moderate leader like S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu, the active support of the local Congress leaders and also the public sympathy with the strike contributed to the tough stand taken by the Congress government against the British capitalists. The Harveys agreed to almost all the demands of the workers following a settlement between the Madura Labour Union and the Harveys.

It was explained to the workers by S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu that the use of Section 144 of the Cr. P.C. against the employers when it was generally used against the workers and the active intervention of the Congress government demonstrated that the Congress ministry was

80. Linlithgow to Erskine, 7 April 1938, F.No.11, 12, 13, 14, Erskine Collection, NMM&L. Erskine to Linlithgow, 29 March 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Vol.65, NMM&L.

81. G.O.No.1384, Dev. Dept., 30-5-38, TNA. G.O.No.904, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., 28-5-38, TNA.
with the working class. The agreement was received by some workers jubilantly and by some with disappointment as no wages were to be paid for the strike period. The District Magistrate of Madura reported that the imposition of Section 144 against a British capitalist was received "jubilantly" by all the workers because it showed the workers that the Congress government was supporting the workers' struggle.

Oral interviews with the workers of Madura and Papanasam mills show that the success of the strike in 1938 left an indelible impression on the minds of the workers. The workers were particularly highly impressed by the imposition of Section 144 by the Congress government against the British capitalists. They were also happy with the success of their demands as a result of the strike. The success of the strike helped promote pro-Congress attitudes, nationalist sentiments and unity among the workers.

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82. G.O.No.904, Pub. Dept., 28-5-38, TNA.
83. Ibid.
84. Oral interviews with:
   Chokkar Pillai, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
   R. Muthusami, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
   M. Veeranan, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
   E. Dalavai, 14-7-89, Vikramasinghamapuram, Tamilnadu.
   P. Chidambaran Pillai, 13-7-89, Vikramasinghamapuram, Tamilnadu.
The Congress government supported the moderate leadership as against the radical leadership in those cases of industrial conflict when both contended for leadership of the conflicts. Clear examples in this regard were the Mahalakshmi Mill workers' strike in October 1938 and Sri Meenakshmi Mill workers' strike in March 1939. In both the strikes there was a struggle between the moderate leadership of S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu and the left leadership represented by Sri Muthuramlinga Thevar and other left leaders for influence over the workers. The Congress government was hesitant to extend support to the strike in Mahalakshmi Mill as the workers were to a great extent under the influence of the left leaders. However the pressure of the public opinion and support to the strike, the local Congress leaders solidarity with the workers, and finally the determination of workers themselves brought the Congress government to intervene in the strike and affect a settlement between the workers and the mill management. The success of this strike led to an increase in the influence of left radical leadership. 85

The struggle was even more intense between S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu and the left leaders during the strike

85. G.O.No.2066, Dev. Dept., 24-8-38, TNA. Also Eamon Murphy, Unions in Conflict, pp.184-85.
of Sri Meenakshi Mill workers in March 1939. The mill management's stand of not recognizing the labour union headed by S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu received full support from the Congress Socialists. The Congress Socialists, who sought to increase their influence in this context, also supported the mill management during the strike by supplying new workers to the mill. The court of enquiry appointed on 23 March 1939 to look into the strike did not recommend the reinstatement of the 800 workers who had gone on strike. V.V. Giri's attempt to save the workers and S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu from defeat did not yield any results. Giri observed at the time: "My difficulty is that a decision of this character will strengthen the reactionaries and Mr. Thevar, who has been doing all that he can for creating trouble and whose aim has been to impede Sri Varadarajulu Naidu from establishing a good trade union movement in Madura." He also believed that the "punishment awarded by Mr. Strathie is out of proportion to the crime involved." Despite the efforts of the Congress government to settle

86. G.O.No.771, Dev. Dept., 28-3-39, TNA. Eamon Murphy, op. cit., p.190. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14, F.R. for the second half of March 1939, NMM&L.

87. G.O.No.1188, Dev. Dept. (Press), 5-5-39, TNA.

88. Ibid.

89. F.No.417, F.No.6-9, C. Rajagopalachary Papers. From V.V. Giri to C. Rajagopalachary, 6 April 1939, NAI.
the strike in favour of the workers, the strike ended in a big failure leaving 800 workers unemployed.\textsuperscript{90}

Yet another instance of capitalist adamancy and uncompromising attitude which placed the Congress government in a helpless situation with regard to the workers was that of the Choolai Mill workers' strike in Madras which started in February 1939 over the question of wage increase. The strike involved 2,700 workers; and it continued for 4 months. The Congress government at first considered the strike to be "ill-advised"\textsuperscript{91} because in its view the workers were hasty in going on strike; and it criticized the strike through a press communique. The mill management informed the government on 13 July 1939, that the mill had gone into voluntary liquidation from 8 May 1939.\textsuperscript{92}

While C. Rajagopalachary felt that there was nothing that could be done in the context of Choolai workers and that "strikers can go home or find other employment instead of carrying on demonstrations",\textsuperscript{93}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{90} G.O.No.1188, \textit{Dev. Dept.} (Press), 5-5-39, TNA.
  \item \textsuperscript{91} G.O.No.1327, \textit{Dev. Dept.}, 22-5-39, TNA. G.O.No.2109, \textit{Dev. Dept.}, 25-8-39, TNA.
  \item \textsuperscript{92} G.O.No.1327, \textit{Dev. Dept.}, 22-5-39, TNA.
  \item \textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
V.V. Giri sharply disagreed with him. On 1 April 1939, he said: "We must attempt and see that the mill works again. I told the workers long ago that they were harming themselves by their direct action. Anyway we must protect the workers as against themselves. It results in the unemployment of two thousand six hundred and consequent starvation of so many people." 94

Nothing practicable was possible for the Congress government either to stop the closing of the Choolai Mill or to reemploy the displaced workers in some other occupations. The strike was a big failure and also a setback to the working class movement. It also resulted in a certain degree of disillusionment and discontent among the workers with regard to the moderate working class leadership and also the Congress government. The Madras Labour Union criticized the Congress ministry for not adopting any measure to bring pressure on the mill management for the re-employment of the workers and the settlement of the dispute. 95

Another instance which caused "intense bitterness" among the workers and their leaders was the police

94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.
repression during the strike of minor workers in Bucking-
gham & Carnatic Mills in March 1938. Yet in general
the Labour leaders, for example, G. Chelvapathy Chetty
and T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, warned the workers
not to resort to hasty strikes as the Congress government
was trying to settle the problems of the workers. They
also explained to the workers the labour policy of the
government. In labour meetings they referred to the
improvement in the condition of the working class as a
result of the coming to power of the Congress ministry.
It must however be mentioned that the failure of workers' strikes and ambiguous stand of the Congress government in specific strikes in Madras city between 1937 and 1939 led to some discontent and dissatisfaction among the workers and their leaders.

The general strike in Coimbatore textile industry was due to the combined influence of both moderate and left radical leadership. The strike by the textile

96. G.O.No.1117, Dev. Dept. (MS), 29-4-38, TNA. F.No. 186, G. Chelvapathy Chetty Papers, From G. Chelvapathy Chetty, Gen. Secretary, MLU to C. Rajagopala-
chary, 9 March 1938, NMM&L.

97. Letter No.804, Dev. Dept., 23-4-38, TNA.
Letter No.514, Dev. Dept., 2-3-38, TNA.
Letter No.2628, Dev. Dept., 27-11-37, TNA.

98. Letter No.419, Dev. Dept., 20-2-39, TNA.

G.O.No.1314-15, Dev. Dept., 23-5-38, TNA.
workers in 11 factories of the city commenced towards the end of October and in the beginning of November 1937 primarily over basic economic demands. The strike involved as many as 12,000 workers.\textsuperscript{100} The Congress government appealed to the workers to end the strike and also promised the appointment of a court of enquiry into the grievances of workers of the textile factories of Coimbatore.\textsuperscript{101} The strike was subsequently brought to an end by 9 November 1937 by the efforts of V.V. Giri, N.G. Ramaswamy Naidu, moderate leader and also a member of the Legislative Assembly, and T.S. Avinashilingam Chetty and K. Subramanyam, the local Congress leaders. The left leaders charged the moderate leaders and the local Congress leaders with sabotaging the strike.\textsuperscript{102}

The government appointed M. Venkataramayya, acting District Session Judge of North Malabar, as court of enquiry on 19 December 1937 to enquire into the industrial dispute. He recommended in a 100 pages report increase in wages and various other benefits for the workers. Most

\textsuperscript{100}. F.No.18/11/37, Fortnightly Report for the second half of November 1937, Home Dept. Poll., NAI.

\textsuperscript{101}. F.No.PL-3/1937, AICC Papers.

\textsuperscript{102}. F.No.G-92/1937, AICC Papers.
important of these was the recommendation that every registered trade union must be accorded recognition by the mill management. The Congress government immediately endorsed the recommendations of the court of enquiry.\textsuperscript{103}

While the Southern India Mill Owners' Association, Coimbatore and the Governor of Madras observed that the mill managements had accepted the recommendations of the court of enquiry,\textsuperscript{104} the trade unions, in their letter to V.V. Giri, complained of the non-implementation of the recommendations of the court of enquiry and also of the attempts of the capitalists to crush the labour movement.\textsuperscript{105}

On the whole, workers in textile industry did gain substantial concessions with the support of the Congress ministry and especially of V.V. Giri, who was eager to do something tangible for the workers. The cases of Madurai, Papanasam and Coimbatore strikes which involved more than 20,000 textile workers bears testimony to this. In June 1938, speaking to the 6,000 workers of

\textsuperscript{103} The Hindu, 23 May 1937.

\textsuperscript{104} G.O.No.2792, Dev. Dept., 8-11-38, TNA. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. Report No.17 of 1938, 21 Sept. 1937, NMM&L.

\textsuperscript{105} G.O.No.3024, Dev. Dept., 14-12-39, TNA. G.O.No.902, Dev. Dept., 5-4-39, TNA.
Papanasam mill in Vikramasinghapuram, Giri congratulated the workers for the success they had won during the "three months of your strike and suffering". 106 Similarly while addressing the 10,000 workers of Coimbatore textile industry on 18 June 1939, V.V. Giri appealed to the workers "to take advantage of the sympathy of the government who were ever willing to help them by cooperating with them." 107 Thus V.V. Giri continuously sought to maintain a dialogue and interaction between the working class and the Congress government. This in itself helped to contribute to the growth of working class movement and helped in maintaining the confidence of the working class in the National Congress and the Congress ministry. The Congress government also helped consolidate the influence of the moderate working class leadership during the period of its ministry.

The Congress ministry did not hesitate to condemn the action of the industrial workers when they resorted to certain violent action during the strike period. It rebunked the tendency of the workers to resort to violent picketing before the factory gate, and also to stage stay-in-strike in the factories. Most important

106. The Hindu, 16 June 1938.
107. Letter No.1865, Dev. Dept., 26-7-39, TNA.
examples in this context are the Chirala Tobacco Company Workers' strike in February 1938 and the Chittivalasa Jute Mill workers' strike in February 1939. Workers in both industries were under the leadership of local Congress leaders. While K. Subbarao, an MLA, was the leader of the Chittivalasa jute workers, M. Yagnanarayan was the President of the Chirala Tobacco Workers' Union. Picketing was adopted by the tobacco workers in Chirala to prevent the blacklegs from entering the factory. When the picketing activity of the workers led to violence, it was met with brutal police repression. And the police firing on the workers resulted in the death of 3 workers and left several injured. Similarly when the Chittivalasa jute workers staged a stay-in-strike on 14 February 1939 the police lathi-charged them and fired upon them. This led to the death of one worker and injuries to nearly one hundred.


110. The Hindu, 15 Feb. 1939.

In the two strikes, the Congress government criticized the action of the workers in resorting to violence during the strike time. It also supported the police firing on the workers in the two cases. The Congress ministry endorsed the findings of Justice Horwill Committee on Chirala police firing which placed the blame on the workers and their leadership for the incident and vindicated the police action.\textsuperscript{112} The police firing on the Chittivalasa jute workers was supported with the reason that the "stay-in-strike" was a "dangerous form of violent criminal trespass" and had to be "dealt with by the use of force with fatal and disproportionate results."\textsuperscript{113}

There was a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the findings of Justice Horwill report on Chirala firing.\textsuperscript{114} Peteti Venkatadri, Vice-President of the Chirala Tobacco Workers' Union, complained of the continuing police arrests of the union workers after the police firing.\textsuperscript{115} B. Narasimha Rao, General Secretary of the

\textsuperscript{112} The Hindu, 19 April 1938.

\textsuperscript{113} The Hindu, 15 Feb. 1939. Andhra Patrika, 30 March 1939.


\textsuperscript{115} The Hindu, 6 March 1938.
workers' union, also complained that the workers belonging to the labour union were being harassed and he felt that the Congress government was not helping the workers as had been done in the context of Madurai and Papanasam workers' strikes.116

The Chittivalasa firing incident shook to some degree the confidence of even the moderate leaders in the Congress ministry. Karunakaram Subba Rao, leader of the Chittivalasa jute workers, speaking at a protest meeting held in Madras city in February 1939 stated that "it was deplorable...that such an incident should have occurred under the Congress regime. The stay-in-strike could not be termed criminal trespass. Workers had no weapon except strike to have their grievances redressed."117 P. Venkata Rao, President of Nellimarla Jute Workers' Union, as Chairman of the reception committee of the first Provincial Labour Conference, held at Nellimarla in April 1939, complained that Congress ministry had not been as sympathetic as it ought to be.118

The Chirala and Chittivalasa firing incidents also invoked certain amount of criticism from the Andhra

Congress leaders.\textsuperscript{119} The \textit{Andhra Patrika}, in its editorials, strongly criticized the police firing on the workers in Chirala and Chittivalasa.\textsuperscript{120} It observed that workers' strikes and violence during them were not due just to the workers alone, the repression measures by the authorities also contributed to them.\textsuperscript{121}

It is of interest in this respect that C. Rajagopalachary opposed the grant of gallantry medals of certain police officers for their action during the Chirala firing incidents. He held that no special acts of gallantry were performed by the police.\textsuperscript{122} Similarly he held the District Magistrate of Vizagapatam responsible for ordering police firing which he considered unnecessary and avoidable. He considered the Magistrate's act to be "an act of utter stupidity."\textsuperscript{123}

The later perception of the workers of Chittivalasa jute mills of the strike in 1939 is quite interesting.

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Andhra Patrika}, 22 Feb. 1939.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Andhra Patrika}, 30 March 1939.
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Andhra Patrika}, 12 April 1939.
\textsuperscript{122} Erskine to Linlithgow, 16 Aug. 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Vol.\textit{No.63}, 1939, NMM&L.
\textsuperscript{123} Erskine Collection, 15, 16, 17, C. Rajagopalachary's observation on 3-4-39, NMM&L.
For what it is worth, I will reproduce their view of the role of the Congress ministry as brought out by my interviews with some of them. They now see the strike as directed primarily against British capitalist exploitation. They say that they were aware of the fact that the British government was supporting the British capitalists in Chittivalasa. The police firing was seen as the work of the British government and the Congress ministry had very little role to play because of its lack of real political power. A participant who was active in the strike and present on the day of police firing told me: "There was the Congress ministry but the ministries were under the white masters as servants. Therefore, they could not do anything."124 Workers of Chittivalasa were pro-Congress and had developed strong nationalist sentiments and these sentiments were not weakened by the police action. But workers also felt that the strike had fostered a great deal of unity among them and strengthened their organization.125 A woman

124. Ch. Appala Narasayya, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.

125. I. Jogarao, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
    Ch. Appala Narasayya, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
    G. Ammannayya, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
    T. Ramulu, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
    P. Appanna, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
worker, who was a participant in the Chirala strike, told me that police firing took place because the Congress government did not favour workers' militant activity. P. Venkateswarlu, a radical working class leader, is still of the view that there was no provocation from the workers and the provocation was only from the side of the police party. He criticized the Congress ministry for not supporting the workers and for not taking any action against the employer after the strike. Some of the radical working class leaders said that the Congress government's attitude to the strikes in Chirala and Chittivalasa had contributed to the growth of disillusionment among the workers with the Congress and the Congress ministry.

The Congress ministry did not hesitate to arrest workers and their leaders and to prosecute them. These actions were justified as necessary for the maintenance of law and order. The use of police force in the context of Diocesan press workers' strike, Jamal Glass workers'

126. I. Kotamma, 19-8-88, Chirala, Andhra Pradesh.
127. P. Venkateswarlu, 17-8-88, Jaggayapeta, Andhra Pradesh.
strike and Choolai Mill workers' strike in June 1938 was justified with the explanation that the use of police force was necessary to curb the violent activity of the workers in Madras city.129

The Congress government also opposed the left radical leadership's emphasis on the contradictions within the capitalist system and their advocacy of class struggle in which the working class was to play the vanguard role. It did not view favourably the growth of radical political activity among the workers. It opposed class conflict as it would hinder industrial development of the presidency. The left radical leadership's attempts to counterpoise the spirit of confrontation and direct action to the spirit of negotiation met with strong rebuff from the Congress government. C. Rajagopalachary was quite critical towards the activities of the left leaders. He considered the left leaders to be "mischief makers" and "mischievous elements".130 In particular, the work of the left radicals among the


industrial workers was of special concern to the Congress ministry.\textsuperscript{131} The Madras Government strongly opposed the left leaders' attempt to spread the ideas of socialism and communism. Referring to the propaganda of S.S. Batliwala, a Congress Socialist from Bombay at various places in the Madras presidency, C. Rajagopalachary observed at Namakal on 9 October 1937, that "there was also the added difficulty of people having no work in other provinces coming over here to create mischief by inciting the masses to violence. As the minister-in-charge of police he could not keep quiet and allow such things to go on. He must snatch a revolver and do something to curb such things, if necessary."\textsuperscript{132}

The Congress government issued a press communique on 9 August 1938 severely criticizing the Communists for advocating revolutionary action by the working class and for denouncing of non-violent Gandhian method of struggle and for preaching of class war and thereby seeking to disrupt class harmony.\textsuperscript{133} In fact C. Raja-


gopalachary himself had authored this press communiqué. He also complained to Vallabhbhai Patel that Madras presidency had become a "proper experimenting ground" for the left radicals, and he requested Patel to tell Jawaharlal Nehru that "he should not contribute to the swell-headedness of local so-called socialists by too much correspondence with them." C. Rajagopalachary attributed the growing industrial conflict to "a certain amount of thoughtlessness and confusion of principles and propaganda and wrong leadership of some men."

Because of moderate approach to industrial relations, V.V. Giri too was opposed to the work of left radicals among the industrial workers. He was quoted as having severely criticized the Communists for aiming at "the destruction of ordered society and for sowing the seed of plain, naked and undiluted communism." He also


135. F.No.5-6-1937-42, *C. Rajagopalachary Papers.* Letter from C. Rajagopalachary to Vallabhbhai Patel, 12 Oct. 1937, NAI.


137. *Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14.* Speech of C. Rajagopalachary in Legislative Assembly, on 20 Feb. 1939, NMM&L.

said that the Congress government "could be relied upon to keep the scales even between the workers and the employers" and that a "trade union should be formed not with the idea of fermenting strikes but avoiding them."\(^{139}\)

It was this approach and policy of the Congress government which brought it into conflict with the left radical leadership. The conflict in the two perceptions was conspicuously evident in the general strike of the workers in the sugar industry in Nellikuppam, Ranipet and Samalkot.

The influence of the left leadership came to be strongly felt among the sugar workers of Madras presidency by 1939. The prominent left working class leaders were P. Jeevanandam, Ratham Pillai and R. Jagannatham.\(^{140}\) The apathy shown by the capitalists towards the worker's demands was met with the challenge of a general strike by the sugar workers of Nellikuppam, Ranipet and Samalkot. The Commissioner of Labour appointed to enquire into the problems of the workers concluded that the demands of workers were untimely.\(^{141}\) Consequently,

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139. The Hindu, 12 Aug. 1939.
140. G.O.No.1748, Pub. Dept., 30-10-36, TNA. G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.
the workers became restive and toward the end of March 1939 all the labour unions informed the factory managements that a general strike would commence any day after the first week of April 1939.

The prospect of general industrial unrest in sugar industry alerted the Congress government and it issued a press communique on 6 April 1939 informing the workers that it would not favour a strike in the sugar industry. The general strike which commenced towards the end of April 1939 was a remarkable testimony to the growing influence of the left radical leadership. The Congress government held that the workers had "no justification for immediate direct action." It also felt that the matters were precipitated by the left leaders; and, therefore, it completely disapproved of the strike. C. Rajagopalachary appealed to the workers who were on strike: "You have been misled by thoughtless men who still persist in keeping you on the wrong path. Your present activities to keep up the strike amount to a fight carried on against the Government, against Sri Giri and me rather than against the factory management." The strong disapproval

142. Ibid.
of the strike by the government and its opposition to the left radical leadership led to a failure of the strike. The police regression on the workers and the arrest of Ratnam Pillai, R. Jagannathan and eight other left leaders and their prosecution also contributed to the collapse of the strike. However, one redeeming feature of the strike was the active support and sympathy extended by the local Congress committees. 145

The same kind of attitude and approach was followed by the Congress government in the case of fibre workers' strike led by the Congress Socialists in Cocanada in April 1939. The police repression on the strikers and arrest of strike leaders followed the strike. The local Congress committee, while expressing sympathy with the strike criticized the policy of the Congress government toward the industrial dispute.146 However, a settlement was brought about between the workers and the merchant with the intervention of the Commissioner of Labour.147

145. G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.

146. Andhra Patrika, 5 April 1939; The Hindu, 8 April 1939; National Front, 23 April 1939; Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for the first half of April 1939, NMM&L.

147. The Hindu, 10 May 1939.
The left leaders consistently criticized the Congress ministry for the use of police during industrial strikes and for its drive against the left wing working class leaders. Defending the left wing, Jai Prakash Narain, speaking at a public meeting in November 1937, argued that the Congress Socialists were working to strengthen the Indian National Congress and the national movement and the criticism directed against the Congress ministry was only to point out its mistakes. Socialists were only offering friendly advice and criticism to the Congress leaders, he said.

The left leaders also argued that the workers' strikes were not directed against the Congress ministry as C. Rajagopalachary had characterized the strike of the sugar workers, but were merely the workers' attempts to improve their economic conditions. Thus, speaking to workers in Madras on 1 July 1938, A.S.K. Iyengar explained that when the industrial workers went on strike it did not mean that they were dissatisfied with the Congress ministry and that they wanted to cause it embarrassment. Such accusation would only go to support the capitalist argument. Earlier in June 1938,

148. The Hindu, 24 Nov. 1937.
149. The Hindu, 12 March 1938.
150. The Hindu, 2 July 1938.
while addressing workers in Tuticorin, he said that the Congress had accepted offices to carry on the anti-imperialist struggle on a new front and, therefore, appealed to the workers to organize themselves and to join the Congress in the fight for freedom. 151

Despite all their criticism, the left leaders looked upon the Congress ministry as a people's ministry. 152 They argued that while the Congress ministry could be criticized for some of its mistake, it would be incorrect to say that the Congress ministry had become the agent of British imperialism. 153 In fact the role of the left wing working class leaders during 1937 and 1939 may be understood with reference to their endeavour to develop socialist consciousness among the working class and simultaneously to radicalize the Indian National Congress and the Indian national movement through vehement and unflagging criticism. For instance, in August 1938, P. Jeevanandam, speaking to Villepura national railway workers on socialism, advised them to join the Congress and strengthen the national movement. 154

151. The Hindu, 22 June 1938.
152. New Age, June 1938.
154. G.O.No.2362, Dev. Dept., 22-9-38, TNA.
The radical leaders criticized the Congress ministry on the ground that it was disregarding the interest of the workers. E.M.S. Namboodripad in his letter to Jawaharlal Nehru charged that the Congress leaders of Malabar were not sympathetic to the workers' cause. There was also a growing feeling within left circles that V.V. Giri was breaking strikes by persuading the workers to go back to work very often unconditionally.

The left leaders strongly criticized the police repression on the workers during the strikes of Cocanada Fibre workers, Tobacco workers of Chirala, Jute workers of Chittivalasa, Textile workers of Mahalakshmi Mill in Madura and Tile workers of Calicut. G. Krishnamurthy, M.L.A., in his letter of 17 February 1934 to C. Rajagopalachary observed that the Congress ministry was doing nothing but tinkering with the real problems affecting labour. He stated that Congress government's characterization of 'stay-in-strike' as 'dangerous criminal trespass'

155. G.O.No.1096, Dev. Dept., 26-4-38, TNA.

156. No.417, No.2, F.No.3-5, E.M.S. Namboodripad to President, INC, 1 Nov. 1938, C. Rajagopalachary Papers, NAI.

was one sided. 158

Even earlier, P. Jeevanandam, speaking at a meeting held at Madras on 29 August 1937, criticized the Congress ministry's action against the left leaders who were fighting for "real democracy". 159 Similarly, R. Jagnanathan at a meeting of workers in Coimbatore on 6 November 1937 condemned the Congress ministry for the arrest of S.S. Batliwala and for "unleashing" repression against the leftists who were struggling to destroy British imperialism in India. 160 A. Madhava Menon and other Congress Socialists in Malabar wrote letters to the President of the Congress protesting against the arrest of S.S. Batliwala. 161 P. Sundarayya, in his presidential address at the Annual Conference of Andhra Congress Socialist Party,

158. F.No.5-6:1937-42, Letter from G. Krishnamurthy, MLA, Gen. Secretary, M&SM Railway Employees' Union to C. Rajagopalachary, 17 Feb. 1939, C. Rajagopalachary Papers, NAI.

159. G.O.No.1809, Pub. Dept. (Gen.), 22-9-37, TNA.

160. G.O.No.2466, Pub. Dept., Confdl., 23-12-37, TNA.

   - Letter from A. Madhava Menon and others to President, INC, 12 Oct. 1937.
   - Letter from E.M.S. Namboodripad to Jawaharlal Nehru, President, INC, 22-10-37.
in December 1937 referred to the "strange behaviour of the Congress ministry toward the left leaders." 162 Jawaharlal Nehru too considered it "absurd" for any one to take action against any one on the question of "sedition" and emphasized the need to apply "non-violent approach in all matters" and "to carry that approach into state action." 163

The left leaders argued that the repressive action of the Madras Congress ministry against militant working class struggles and left leaders was due to the panic created in the camp of the reactionary and right wing leadership of the Congress because they were raising the level of consciousness of the working class in Madras presidency. 164

In the beginning of Congress ministry the capitalists of Madras presidency were apprehensive of the Congress government. 165 Later, they were gradually convinced that Congress government would take no steps

165. The Hindu, 26 Nov. 1937.
that might hinder the growth of industry. G. Kuppuswamy Naidu, Chairman of the Southern India Millowners' Association, speaking at the annual conference of the association in May 1939, referring to the Congress government press communique of 15 February 1939, which condemned the 'stay-in-strike' by the workers and which also conveyed strong disapproval of any form of violent activity by the working class, noted that it promised the employers "some relief and security". 166 In general the labour policy of the Congress government infused confidence among the capitalists. Also the Congress ministry's emphasis that nothing should be done to damage the growth of industry in Madras presidency further strengthened their confidence in the Congress ministry. 167

While the tough action by the Congress government against the industrial working class and its leaders was appreciated and applauded by the British administrators, similar action against the employers was not viewed favourably by them, especially when it was directed against British capitalists. For instance, when the Congress government used Section 144 of Cr. P.C. against the Harveys in Madurai, the Governor of Madras presidency,

166. G.O.No.1501, Dev. Dept., 10-6-39, TNA.
167. G.O.No.2198, Dev. Dept., 8-9-39, TNA.
Erskine and the Viceroy, Linlithgow, bitterly opposed the move. Linlithgow asked Erskine to see that the use of Section 144 against the Harveys was "discouraged". Erskine regarded the use of Section 144 against the employers as most "unusual" and warned the Congress ministry "of serious trouble" if it got "mixed up" in the industrial conflict. The British administration eagerly welcomed the suppression of the militant working class actions. In the case of Chirala police firing, the Governor of Madras observed that he felt glad to note that blame for the firing incident was put on workers and their leaders. The Congress government, while disapproving of the 'stay-in-strike' by the Chittivalasa jute workers in February 1939, did not approve of the modus operandi of removing the workers from the mill. The Congress government held the District Magistrate responsible for the police firing and therefore wanted to transfer him from Vizagapatnam as a mark of punishment. This was firmly opposed by the Governor.

168. Linlithgow to Erskine, 7 April 1938, Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14, NMM&L.


170. From Erskine to Linlithgow, 3 April 1938, Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14, NMM&L.

The Congress government's action against the left radical leaders was also appreciated by the British administrators; and in this respect they had a favourable opinion of the work of the Congress ministry. The British government was also happy to note that there was not much strong left wing element in the Congress ministry in the Madras presidency. The Congress ministry record on the question of maintenance of law and order was characterized as "reasonable".

The advent of Congress ministry heralded a new era in the working class movement in Madras presidency by creating and widening the space for working class activity. An important contribution of the Congress ministry to the advancement of working class movement was through the relaxation of the repressive regime and also by releasing the working class leaders who were jailed by the British government for their activity among the working class. The working class leaders convicted in Kottapattam Summer School case, the Madras


Conspiracy case and S.I. Railway Workers' strike were released by the Congress government.\textsuperscript{175}

The assumption of power by the Congress gave a psychological boost to the working class to articulate their grievances. The fact that as many as 153 industrial strikes occurred between 1937 and 1939, bears a strong testimony to the growth in the awareness of and militancy among workers.\textsuperscript{176} The concessions gained under the Congress ministry by the working class further helped in the consolidation of the working class organizations and led to the advancement of the working class movement.\textsuperscript{177}

Other important aspect of the gains for the working class, despite certain setbacks, was the success of the workers in achieving their economic demands in Madurai, Papanasam and Coimbatore. Moreover of the recommendations of the 5 conciliation boards and 5 courts of enquiry in 1938, only 2 were not accepted by the capitalists, the rest were accepted by both the capitalists and the workers.\textsuperscript{178}

\textsuperscript{175} F.No.PL-3/1937, AIICC Papers.
\textsuperscript{176} Reports on the Administration of the Police of the Madras Province for 1938 and 1939, TNA.
\textsuperscript{177} New Age, Dec. 1937.
\textsuperscript{178} The Hindu, 26 Dec. 1938.
Other remarkable gain of the working class during the Congress ministry period was that the right of the workers to organization was recognized and trade unions given recognition. The capitalists were told by the ministry to accept this right. V.V. Giri was to argue that the Congress government was different from the previous British government precisely in this respect. Before the formation of the Congress ministry, workers were unable to organize themselves, the representations by the working class organizations to the British government went unheeded and the capitalists and the British government combined to suppress working class activity.

To sum up, there was notable advancement in the working class movement during the Congress ministry period i.e. 1937 to 1939, which was evident in terms of the growing level of class consciousness of the workers and the growth in the working class organizations and their trade union activity during the period.

180. The Hindu, 8 March 1939.
181. The Hindu, 12 April 1939.