CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Under conditions of grinding poverty the industrial working class of the Madras presidency was strongly influenced by changing ideological and political developments during the years 1928 to 1939. It developed strong political awareness as a consequence of the intense process of politicization promoted by the leaders of the Indian National Congress and working class organisations. The anti-imperialist movement also greatly widened the political awareness of the working class. The British government's repressive measures assisted further in forging links between the working class and the anti-imperialist movements.

The reasons for the growth of working class consciousness were firmly rooted in material and non-material spheres. It was not only the economic factor but also the political and ideological factors which contributed to the development of working class consciousness between 1928 and 1939. The intense industrial conflict that was witnessed toward the end of 1930s was not only a consequence of the poor economic conditions but was also a remarkable manifestation of growing anti-capitalist ideas promoted through intense propaganda. Participation
of the working class in and its solidarity with the anti-imperialist movement between 1928 and 1939 period bears a strong testimony to the rising anti-imperialist consciousness among the workers of the Madras presidency. It cannot be said that the industrial working class had, by 1939, been able to acquire socialist consciousness; yet it may be noted that socialist ideas had begun to influence it by 1939.

The Madras presidency comprised of three linguistic regions namely, Tamilnadu, Andhra and Malabar. It remained industrially backward. With the exception of textile industry, it did not record any notable progress in the development of large scale industry. In the main only small scale and light industry developed. The other notable feature of the industrial development was its regional disparity. While the Tamilnadu region was relatively industrially advanced (owing to textile industry), the other two regions namely Andhra and Malabar lagged far behind. Moreover, industrial development of the presidency was not only neglected but also distorted by the deliberate policies of the British government. Lack of a coherent industrial policy, absence of industrial credit facilities, neglect of modern technical education and unfavourable export and import
policies pursued by the government underlay the industrial backwardness of the presidency before 1939.

Different social groups, of which the depressed classes formed a significant portion, uprooted from the villages owing to economic and social factors, joined the ranks of the industrial working class. Woman workers formed one-fourth of the total work force; adolescents and children were also employed in different organised and unorganised industries. Jobbers or middlemen played an important role in the life of the industrial workers from securing employment to supervising work in the industry. This indispensable position of the jobbers bred corruption which told heavily on the life of the workers.

Inadequate wages of the workers were a general feature in the presidency before 1939. Disparity in the wages of workers between one industry and the other, between one region and the other, and between organised and unorganised industries was widely prevalent. There was no minimum wages act. Women and child workers were, as a rule, paid lower wages. While the standard of living of the workers in organised industry was poor for workers in organized industries, it was even lower for workers in the unorganized industry. Workers were
made to work long hours, usually 9 to 11 hours a day, for the low wages. Housing constituted a big problem for them. They lived under most insanitary and filthy conditions.

The prevailing working conditions in industries were equally bad. Most essential facilities such as drinking water, latrines, creches, canteens and industrial safety measures left much to be desired in most industries. Ill-ventilated and humid conditions were a general feature. Insanitary conditions at home and in the factory coupled with long hours of work told heavily on the health of the workers. Also the demon of the drinking habit and the hold of the moneylender had devastating effect on the life of workers. Both the employers and the British government showed little regard for the workers' welfare.

II

The industrial working class living under conditions of grinding poverty came to be strongly influenced by developments in the political and ideological spheres. The right wing leaders of the Indian National Congress appealed to the workers to play, as being part of the Indian nation, their due role in the national political struggle for independence. The moderate working
class leaders, while asking the industrial workers to fight for their economic demands, wanted them to actively support and strengthen the anti-imperialist movement. The left wing leaders of the Congress and of the left parties, groups and trade unions tried vigorously to promote socialist ideas along with anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist sentiments among the working class. However, quite significantly, what was common to all the shades of thinking before 1939 was that all of them projected before the working class the idea that as long as British imperialism was there in India, there would not be any improvement in its living and working conditions.

Moreover, despite the repressive measures of the British government, the growth of radical literature and the radical press made an important contribution to the growth of radical ideas among the working class. As a consequence of the intense politicization process, and also of the growth of Communist and Congress Socialist organisations, a more organised working class movement began to develop in Madras presidency in the 1930s, especially after 1934. Workers in unorganised industry also began to be organised by the left forces.
The growing consciousness of the working class was manifested in several ways. Slogans like "Down with Imperialism", "Down with Capitalism", "Victory to Labour" formed part of the demonstrations of the industrial workers. Workers also learned to celebrate "May Day", "Lenin Day", "Karl Marx Day", and "Russian Revolution Day" in many parts of the presidency. The growing industrial conflict of this period sufficiently indicates the growing maturity of the working class consciousness. With the exception of the two railway strikes, i.e., S.I. Railway Workers' strike in 1928 and M&SM Railway workers' strike in 1932, the period between 1928 and 1936 did not experience intense industrial conflict. On the other hand, with the exception of the railways, the period between 1937 and 1939 witnessed a sharp rise in industrial conflict in several industries. Thus the period between 1928 and 1939 was remarkable for the process of the crystallization of trade union consciousness of the working class as also its growing anti-imperialist consciousness.

III

The period between 1928 and 1939 also witnessed a transformation in the social outlook of the National Congress. It marked the growth of a leftward orientation
in it. There was greater concern within the Congress for bringing the industrial working class within the mainstream of the anti-imperialist movement. Efforts were also made by the Congress leaders to forge closer links between the Congress and the working class movement. The Karachi Resolution of 1931 and the Congress election manifesto of 1937 were symbolic of this trend.

The moderate working class leaders of the Madras presidency explained to the workers the interlinkage between the miserable conditions of the workers and the exploitative rule of the British government. They also drew their attention to the fact that unless India won independence there could be no hope for improvement in the economic conditions of the working class. Therefore, they emphasized the political role of the workers in the anti-imperialist struggle. They made fervent appeals to the industrial workers to take active part in the anti-imperialist movement.

The left leaders also explained to the workers the necessity of working class participation in the national struggle. They too tried to impress on the workers the idea that unless India got independence, the working class could not hope to improve its present economic situation and develop its movement for socialism.
The left leaders, therefore, emphasized that winning independence for India was a precondition for bringing about socialism in India. Workers were asked in their own interest to participate in the anti-imperialist movement and strengthen the Indian National Congress.

Consequently, the industrial working class participated actively in the Simon Commission boycott movement of 1928 and 1929 and the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-1934. Similarly, the industrial working class and its organisations participated in the "Anti-Constitution Hartal Day" on 1 April 1937 as a protest against the imposition of an unwanted constitution on India. Workers gave massive support to the Congress in the 1937 elections, electing all the 6 Congress candidates to the 6 seats in Madras legislature reserved for labour. Working class participation in the anti-imperialist movement assumed both spontaneous and organized and violent and non-violent forms.

The industrial workers perceived that if India won independence, there would be an end to their exploitation and their economic conditions would be improved. They also saw the Indian National Congress as the main anti-imperialist organisation fighting for the independence of India. This aspect was prominent in the oral
interviews with the workers conducted by me in several parts of the then Madras presidency.

The growth of anti-imperialist movement influenced the working class as much as it was affected by the working class movement. While the national movement and the National Congress influenced the working class and its movement both ideologically and organisationally, the growth of working class movement also contributed to the strengthening of national movement and the Congress, their ideological transformation.

IV

There was a sharp increase in industrial conflict following the relaxation of the repressive regime during the Congress ministry period, i.e. 1937-1939. The working class movement was also able to make substantial gains during this period.

The Congress government attempted to enact labour legislation which covered the aspects of unemployment assistance, settlement of trade disputes and recognition of trade unions. While the proposed legislative measures were opposed by the employers, the working class organisations welcomed them. The latter, however, suggested certain modifications so as to better safeguard the workers' interests. The British administration considered
the proposed legislation to be too radical. The ministry, however, failed to give the legislation the form of law, and it was still at the discussion stage when the ministry resigned.

Certain other measures like regulation of working hours in factories, giving relief to workers from indebtedness, and introduction of weekly payment of wages were also put forward by the Congress government but they too could not be enacted. The only moves which were concretised during the Congress ministry period were in the direction of bringing about an amendment to the Madras Maternity Benefit Act, 1935 with a view to protect women workers and the implementation of prohibition programme on an experimental basis in Salem, and less industrialized areas, in Chittoor and Cuddapah and on the limited scale, the prohibition programme proved a complete success.

The intense industrial conflict forced the Congress government to delineate its labour policy which emphasized: strikes as a last resort; internal settlement to be preferred to external settlement; and peaceful co-existence of social classes. Consequently, the Congress government tended to support the moderate sections of the working class movement. For instance, the Madurai and Papanasam textile workers' strike in 1938 and the
Coimbatore general strike of textile workers in 1937 received full support and sympathy of the Congress government because they were led by moderate leaders. On the other hand, the Congress government did not approve of militant strike actions whether they were conducted by the moderate leaders or the left leaders. Consequently, it condemned the strikes of workers in Chirala in 1938 and in Chittivalasa in 1939, in which police firing took place resulting in the deaths of several workers. Both the strikes were led by leaders who were also local Congress leaders. Similarly, the sugar workers' strike of 1939 led by the left leaders was opposed by the Congress government, leading to its failure.

The Congress government did not want the left leaders to spread ideas of class antagonism and class struggle and thus promote class disharmony. It also did not view favourably the left leaders' endeavours to propagate the ideas of socialism and communism.

One significant feature of all the industrial strikes of the ministry period was that the local Congress leaders and local Congress committees supported the strikes and extended their sympathies to the workers. They also strongly criticized the police repression on the workers during the strikes.
The left leaders sharply attacked the Congress ministry for its tough and hostile attitude toward militant strikes. They also bitterly criticized the Congress ministry for police repression and prosecution of the strike leaders. However, while criticizing the Congress government for its mistakes, the left leaders of the working class still regarded the Congress ministry as people's ministry and asked the workers to strengthen the national movement led by the National Congress.

The initial apprehensions of the capitalists regarding the Congress ministry's labour policy were dispelled by the attitude of the Congress government toward militant strike struggles. While the British administrators appreciated the tough action by the Congress government against militant strikes, especially those involving violence, they were angry when the government took action against the capitalists, especially British capitalists, as in the case of the Harveys in Madurai.

The contribution of the Congress government to the working class movement was as a whole positive. It created and widened the space for greater working class activity by its relaxation of repressive measures and provision of greater civil liberty, especially in the terms of freedom of speech and press, and its recognition
of the right of the industrial workers to trade union organisation. Thus, it can be said that overall the Congress government, 1937-1939, represented a great deal of advancement in the working class movement in the Madras presidency.