CHAPTER II

WORKING CLASS AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS
IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY, 1928-1939

This chapter deals with the development of working class consciousness in Madras presidency between 1928 and 1939. Three Marxist scholars have influenced me in the formation of my broad conceptual framework. I feel it, therefore, necessary to present a brief account of the perspectives represented by these scholars who have made a substantial contribution to the historiography of English working class in nineteenth century England.

The three Marxist scholars are E.P. Thompson, John Foster and Gareth Stedman Jones. While E.P. Thompson underlines the importance of social and cultural factors in his study of class and class consciousness, John Foster and Gareth Stedman Jones approach the concept of class and class consciousness from economic and political perspectives respectively. An attempt is made here in the first section of this chapter to present the three scholars' perspectives on class and class consciousness.

E.P. Thompson's work on The Making of the English Working Class is an important contribution to the historiography of the nineteenth century working class history
of England. His ideas are further developed in four major articles which discuss the social history of the eighteenth century England and particularly of the working class and its consciousness.¹

E.P. Thompson presents in his work on *The Making of the English Working Class* an analysis of the formation of the working class and its coming to consciousness. He argues that the social and cultural factors are as important as the economic and political factors in the making of the working class. He does not accept the dichotomy of base and super-structure as embedded in the Marxist tradition. He thinks that primacy cannot be accorded to any single factor in the analysis of social and political developments.

E.P. Thompson strongly criticizes the narrow conception of the 'economic' factor playing the determinant role in the making of social relations in the capitalist mode of production. Instead he believes that the mode of production.

production furnishes the attendant relations of production.²

E.P. Thompson explains his ideas on the question of base and super-structure thus: "The analogy of base and superstructure is radically defective. It cannot be repaired. It has an in-built tendency to lead the mind towards reductionism or a vulgar economic determinism, by sorting out human activities and attributes and placing some (as Law, the Arts, Religion, "Morality") in a super-structure, others (as technology, economics, the applied sciences) in a base, and leaving yet others (as linguistics, work-discipline) to float unhappily in between. In this form it has a tendency to move into an alliance with utilitarian and positivist thought: that is, with central positions, not of Marxist, but of bourgeois ideology....³

Rejection of the notion of economic determinism and the reconceptualization of mode of production lead him to understand "class" not as a historical category or structure but as a historical phenomenon which happens in a given historical context. He holds that class does develop


in capitalist society over a period of time in the process of production: "By class I understand a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of desperate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasize that it is a historical phenomenon. I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relations."^4

By arguing that the class is not a 'structure' or a 'category', Thompson posits that class in the full sense exists only when there is class consciousness. He argues that people see themselves in a society crucially "...structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class consciousness. Class and class consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process."^5

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According to Thompson, class, as a historical phenomenon, is also a historical relationship. People are born or enter "involuntarily" into the relationships in the process of production. He underlines that the common experience of the people is important in the formation of class and class consciousness. As he puts it: "the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in real context... And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born or enter involuntarily. Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class consciousness does not." 6

Thompson suggests that class is a social and cultural formation and it plays its part in its own making. Working class in England between 1780 and 1832

was able to develop its own understanding of the organisation of society and was capable of understanding the points of antagonism between its interests and the interests of the employers. The important fact of the period between 1780 and 1830 was the formation of "the working class". This was revealed in the growth of class consciousness and in the corresponding growth of political and industrial organisations. He says: "The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history." And "The working class made itself as much as it was made." What Thompson has tried to show in his work was "...how they (artisans, out-workers and labourers) were coming to act, think, and feel, not in the old modes of deference and parochial seclusion, but in class ways." To him, class is thus the last stage in the development of class consciousness in the historical process of class formation. He writes: "Class itself is not a thing, it is a happening...(a) process of self-discovery and of self-definition."

7. Ibid., p.213.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p.937.
10. Ibid., p.939.
John Foster's work on *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* is an interesting attempt at interpreting working class history from orthodox Marxist standpoint.\(^{11}\) It is a study of three towns: Northampton, South Shields and Oldham. "Its central theme", according to him, "is the development and decline of a revolutionary class consciousness in the second quarter of the century. But its basic aim goes beyond this: to further our understanding of how industrial capitalism developed as a whole."\(^{12}\)

J. Foster, unlike E.P. Thompson, underlines the notion of economic determinism in his analysis of development of working class consciousness and the formation of working class as a class. He believes that stimulus to the development of social classes in the capitalist mode of production is supplied from the nature of production itself. As he puts it: "And it was not 'ideas' but the nature of production itself which provided the basic stimulus."\(^{13}\)

According to him, classes emerge in the process of production and class consciousness develops as a result of

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13. Ibid., p.25.
contradictions and crises in the capitalist system; thus class and class consciousness develop as the process of production undergoes changes. The growth of capitalism in England underwent two periods of economic crises between 1790s and 1840s. The first crisis lasted from the mid-1790s to the second decade of the century and the second occurred between 1830 and the late 1840s. The two periods served to undermine the existing structure of English society and had important consequences for the development of the working class and its consciousness.

The first period represented an attack on the living standards of the working class and working class resisted these attacks through militant struggles. He writes: "So although the movement was mainly proletarian in composition and provided the soil in which socialist theory could grow (and would grow in the following decade), it seems too early to talk about 'working-class consciousness'."¹⁴ He characterises this consciousness of the working class as "a very special form of trade union consciousness."¹⁵

Foster considers the crisis in the capitalist mode of production as significant in promoting the further

¹⁴.  Ibid., p.43.
¹⁵.  Ibid.
development of class consciousness of the working class of England in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus he regards the economic factors as conditioning and determining the rise and growth of the working class and its class consciousness.

The 1830s and 1840s witnessed the development of class consciousness of the working class because "...following renewed economic crises in the 1830s and 1840s, this 'Labour consciousness' seems to have been converted (at least in certain areas) into a form of class consciousness..." It was during this period that there was "...the permanent subordination of all sections of the working population to radical control. It is here that ideological developments (linked, of course, to the development of capitalism itself) played such a key role." 17

John Foster thinks that class consciousness is developed in the first half of the nineteenth century by the working class itself as a result of the contradictions and crises in the capitalist system. Thus "it was essentially local and generated inside the labour

16. Ibid., p.7.
17. Ibid., p.146.
movement; it was not the product of a nationally (or internationally) organised revolutionary party. And though... this was largely because the labour movement possessed its own inherited core of jacobin revolutionaries, it is also noteworthy that the precipitating factors were heavily industrial...."  

Though the role of the ideological factors is recognized by John Foster, it is, according to him, the economic factors which play a predominant role. Similarly, he gives primacy to the role of economic factors in the decline of what he calls 'the revolutionary class consciousness' of the working class after 1850s. There was disintegration of working class consciousness from 1850s onwards. He writes: "The most common explanation is 'economic recovery'. Undoubtedly the period did see a lessening of unemployment and a major shift in the basis of economic activity. Matched with the changes in economic policy there was the development of a new heavy industry technology which ultimately did much to reverse the trend to crisis that had brought previous trouble."  

19. Ibid., p.205.
Thus, John Foster in his work brings out and explains the significance of economic factors in the development of English working class and its consciousness in the first half of nineteenth century England.

G.S. Jones's work, *Languages of Class* is a collection of essays on English working class history. The focus of his work is on "the relationship between society and politics in England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: in particular, the changing place attributed to the 'working classes' or 'working class' within the development of the polity."21

G.S. Jones emphasizes the significance of political forces as compared to the economic or cultural ones in determining the nature of class relations and class politics. According to him, developments in the economic or cultural spheres are conditioned by the changing political forces. He argues that political conflict and political mobilization is determined by the political activity of the state. He writes: "In general, the

temporality of periods of heightened political conflict and political mobilization is determined, in the first instance, not by the conditions of the local economy nor by cultural factors, but by the activity of all those institutions of government and political order, both legislative and executive, central and local, which in short we call the state."22 He explains "the development of class and class consciousness from the nature of politics rather than the character of politics from the nature of class."23

G.S. Jones holds that "...the term 'class' is a word embedded in language and should thus be analysed in its linguistic context...."24 He argues that no single factor can sufficiently explain what is class and social, economic, cultural, political and ideological factors "all share a single reference point in an anterior social reality."25

According to Jones, it is the politics of the state which importantly affects changes in the other field of

22. Ibid., pp. 10 & 11.
23. Ibid., p. 8.
24. Ibid., p. 7.
25. Ibid., p. 8.
society. Social and economic grievances are interpreted by the working class as consequence of the monopoly of political power by middle and upper classes. Thus, social and economic grievances are diagnosed in the light of the changing politics of the state. Thus, "given the existence of good material grounds for discontent, it was not consciousness (or ideology) that produced politics but politics that produced consciousness." 26

Jones argues that the changing political forces have a bearing on the development of class consciousness. He explains: "Class consciousness - 'a consciousness of identity of interests between working men of the most diverse occupations and levels of attainment' and 'consciousness of the identity of interests of the working class or productive classes as against those of other classes', as Thompson defines it - formed part of a language whose systematic linkages were supplied by the assumptions of radicalism: a vision and analysis of social and political evils which certainly long predated the advent of class consciousness, however defined." 27

What is clear from his argument is that the nature of class politics is conditioned and influenced by the

27. Ibid., p.102.
political forces. He argues that a strike is a strike. Strike's political dimension is dependent upon the existence of a political organisation which can interpret the political significance of events or instances in the light of the character of the state. In this context Jones suggests that as long as the socialist tinge is not given to the struggles of the working class, struggles by the working class remain only struggles for the betterment of workers' situation. He considers this form of struggles as a form of trade union movement. Working class, at this stage, only possess trade union consciousness. When the working class struggles assume political dimensions and working class acquire political awareness, the working class becomes class conscious.

What, in fact, G.S. Jones has tried to present in his work is that political and ideological factors have played an important role in the 'making' or unmaking of working class in England in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is amply demonstrated in his treatment of Chartism and the decline of the radicalism of the working class from 1850 onwards. The radicalism of the working class declined because the working class had not only abandoned radicalism but grown to a great degree apathetic towards political issues. He writes: "If the 'making of the English working class' took
place in the 1790-1830 period, something akin to a remaking of the working class took place in the years between 1870 and 1900."^28

II

Radicalism is viewed by me as encompassing anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and socialist ideas. The period between 1928 and 1939 in Madras presidency was significant for the process of growth of radical ideas among the working class. The changing economic, political, and ideological factors concretely contributed to this process of the growth of radical ideas. The growth of anti-imperialist consciousness, the repeated attacks by the capitalists on the working class on questions of wages and working conditions, and the activities of the left, radical forces moulded the consciousness of the working class during this period.

The miserable living standards of the workers provided the basic stimulus to the growth of workers' militancy. Also, the year 1928 witnessed both the growth of greater militancy among the working class and a revival in the anti-imperialist movement in India.

This was the year when the Indian working class launched most militant struggles against the onslaught of the capitalist class. Also, it was in 1928-29 that workers of the South Indian Railway and Jute Mill in Chittivalasa of Madras presidency resisted the attacks of the capitalists on their material conditions.  

As in the case of other provinces the years 1928 and 1929 were remarkable for the growth of a new awakening in the working class of Madras presidency. It was during these years that the working class began to realise the importance of the strike as a weapon to wrest their class demands from the capitalist class. Frightened by the rising militancy of the working class, the British Government brought most repressive legislative measures in the form of the Trade Disputes Bill and Public Safety Bill to curb the working class activity.

The Trade Disputes Act of April 1929 consisted of three parts. The first part provided formation


of conciliation boards and courts of enquiry for settlement of disputes, the second part provided fines or imprisonment or both for a strike or lock out in public utility services without 14 days' notice, and the third banned a general strike or sympathetic strikes by workers. The act also provided imprisonment for 3 months and a fine of Rs.200 for joining or abetting an illegal strike.32 The Trade Disputes Bill was sought to be used to curb the working class activity by declaring certain strikes illegal.33 The nationalist press in South India concluded that the main object of the Bill was to prevent certain strikes and that the settlement of trade disputes was only a matter of secondary importance.34

The alarmed British Government, feeling unsafe, came up with yet another repressive measure, namely Public Safety Bill, to contain the rising working class militancy. The Bill was specially aimed at some British communists and working class leaders like Ben Bradley and Philip Spratt who were helping workers organize themselves in

34. Swadesamitran, 31 Jan. 1930, Madras, NNPR, TNA, Madras.
The Public Safety Bill was considered by nationalist press of South India as another "unscrupulous official strategy" to attack the rising political aspirations of the people.\(^{36}\)

The launching of the Meerut Conspiracy Case on 20 March 1929 against 31 labour leaders most of whom were communists, gave a further blow to the growth of working class militancy.\(^{37}\) Regarding the Meerut Case, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote, "...We have had legislations penalising labour like the Trade Disputes Act and the Public Safety Ordinance. We have thus Meerut Trail. We have thus open partisanship of the government with the employers and the police and military being used to break strikes."\(^{38}\)

Despite the mounting repression of the British Government, working class continued to be receptive to the growth of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist sentiment. The Government of Madras also used various ordinance and other measures designed to curb the anti-

\(^{35}\) Sukomal Sen, *op. cit.*, p.298.


\(^{38}\) F.No.16-21/1929, Letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to R.S. Ruikar, 23 Sept. 1929, AICC Papers.
imperialist movement, against working class activity. For instance, section 144 of Criminal Procedure Code, the unlawful instigation ordinance, the prevention of molestation and boycotting ordinance and the unlawful association ordinance were used against the working class on a large scale. 39

These repressive measures did have some restraining influence on the growth of militant working class activity in the Madras presidency. For example, in his presidential address at the annual conference of the Indian Trade Union Federation held on 16 and 17 July 1932 at Madras, V.V. Giri said: 40

"...From a wave of series of strikes in 1928 when trade disputes were at their highest resulting in the passing of Trade Disputes Act and the appointment of the Whitly Commission, we have the crest of unions either dwindling or not being able to meet the onslaughts made against the workers taking advantage of the present depression.... Further, I should like to point that our country being a subject nation, is not in the same position as other 'free' nations in the task of organising the working class movement. Neither Trade Union action nor political action has unrestricted chance of development in this country."

39. The Hindu, 6 July 1932.

B.

The anti-imperialist movement between 1928 and 1939 also made its impact on the consciousness of the working class of the Madras presidency. Also it was during this period that the idea that the working class movement could not progress so long as India remained under colonial domination got crystallised. The indifference of the British government, apart from its oppressive and repressive measures, contributed to this process of the growth of a radical spirit among workers. A detailed discussion of the growth of anti-imperialist sentiments in the working class is taken up in the next chapter of this thesis.

What is clear is that the national movement also helped promote the growth of radicalism among the working class. It was explained to the workers by the working class leaders that the problems of the working class were also linked to the problems of India under British rule. Several trade union leaders told me in oral interviews that the economic struggles of the working class were seen by them to be integral part of the national struggle for independence. 41 V.V. Giri, addressing M&SM Railway employees

41. Interviews with:
P. Ramamurthi, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
S.N. Kaliannan, 3-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
R. Kissen, 4-7-89, Singanallur (Coimbatore), Tamilnadu.
K.K. Nayar, 22-7-89, Cannanore, Kerala.

contd...
said that "...Trade union work to be a success, must...
be coupled with political action - political action from
the point of view of the working class...."42

The elections of 1937 further heightened the process
of politicisation of the working class in Madras presidency.
The Congress election manifesto and the election campaigns
aroused the aspirations and awareness of the workers.43
The British Government grew apprensive because the Congress
election campaign was seen to be promoting "class hatred
and sedition."44 Interestingly enough, all the six Congress
nominated working class representatives were elected by
the workers in the constituencies reserved for workers.
They were as follows:45 G. Chelvapathi Chetti (Textile
Workers' Trade Union, Madras), G. Krishnamurti (Railway
Trade Union), V.V. Narasimham (West Godavary-cum-Kistna-
cum-Guntur Factory Labour), N.G. Ramaswami Nayudu (Textile

contd...
K. Krishnan, 20-7-89, Calicut, Kerala.
M. Veesawamy, 11-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
P. Venkateswarlu, 17-8-88, Jaggayyapeta, Andhra Pradesh.
J. Satyanarayana, 7-6-88, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.

42. The Hindu, 9 July 1934.

43. Interviews with:
M. Veesawamy, op. cit. P. Venkateswarlu, op. cit.
T. Krishnan, 20-7-89, Calicut, Kerala.

44. Erskine to Linlithgow, 24 Dec. 1936 and 6 Jan. 1937,
Erskine Collection, 8, 9, 10, NMM&L, New Delhi.


*New Age*, a monthly organ of the Communist Party of India published from Madras, wrote on the impact of the Congress election campaign and the elections of 1937 on the working class of India:

"...The success of the Congress at the polls and the consequent formation of popular ministries no doubt added to the enthusiasm and determination of the workers... The election manifesto of the Congress and the formation of Congress ministries in seven provinces have introduced a new feature in the working class struggles... Strikes cease to be isolated fights of the factory workers, more and more they came to be regarded as a part of the great democratic movement led by the national Congress...."46

Some of the workers who were interviewed by me also confirmed that the 1937 elections certainly played an important role in raising the workers' anti-imperialist consciousness. They pointed out that the public meetings, demonstrations and speeches of the Congress leaders helped enhance political awareness among the workers.47


47. Interviews with:
M. Veeraswamy, *op. cit.* P. Venkateswarlu, *op. cit.*
R. Muthusami, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
Chokkar Pillai, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
R. Kissen, *op. cit.* A. Tannesi, 2-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
R. Subramaniam, 11-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
M.V. Bhadram, 7-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
C.

The process of imbibing radicalism by the working class was effectively promoted by some of the leaders of the Congress. It may be noted that even the right wing leadership of the National Congress recognised the right of the workers to organise themselves and to resort to strikes to improve their material conditions. It, however, underlined the concept of peaceful methods to get their concessions from the capitalists. Vallababhai Patel speaking to the workers of South Indian Railway observed that the workers had complete freedom to resort to strikes; he wanted, however, that strikes should be carefully used only as an ultimate weapon.\textsuperscript{48} He also told the workers of M&SM that the workers should have their own organisations.\textsuperscript{49}

It was explained by the right wing leaders of the Congress that the Congress was not a class organisation and therefore it could not take a class approach. Babu Rajendra Prasad, as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1935, explained that "...the Congress is a national organisation in which we have got all classes of people, all communities and it is natural for it to take

\textsuperscript{48} Andhra Patrika, 5 Sept. 1929,

\textsuperscript{49} Letter No.1796, PW&LD, 23-3-1929, TNA, Madras.
a nationalistic view of all questions...."50

Though the INC had never supported the concept of class struggle, it was against the exploitation of the workers by the capitalists. Explaining the position of the Congress to the workers of Madura, Rajendra Prasad said, "...today the Congress is not in power. It is only working for it. Therefore you cannot say that the Congress has not done anything for you.... The Congress can never be a party to your exploitation and it can never be guilty of selling your interest. The second thing which I would wish you to remember is, that you should know that the Congress is not in a position to give effect to your demands. It can acquire that position only when Swaraj has been won and I invite you to help the Congress in attaining that position."51 The fact that the Congress was a multiclass organisation was underlined by Rajendra Prasad in several other addresses to the people. For example, at Trichinopoly, he said that there was a room for every class and everyone in the Congress "to come and influence its course." He further said that the sole interest of his tour was to arouse the interest of all people in the struggle for freedom.52

52. The Hindu, 5 Nov. 1935.
The left wing leadership of the Congress represented by Jawaharlal Nehru stood for greater integration of the working class movement with the national movement. Jawaharlal Nehru in his letter on 12 July 1929 wrote that he was more in agreement with the "...more radical elements in the Trade Union movement than with the conservative elements...."\(^53\) Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the foremost leaders of Indian National Congress whose ideas influenced to a great extent the working class and its leaders.\(^54\)

What impressed the working class leaders and working class was Jawaharlal Nehru's espousal of radical and socialist ideas and his emphasis on the organisation of the workers and mobilisation of the masses in the process of securing political power. His Lucknow session presidential address in 1936 was a remarkable statement of his conviction in socialism. He stated: "...I am convinced that the only key to the solution of the world's problems and India's problem lies in socialism, and when I use this word I do so not in vague humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense. Socialism is however something even more than an economic doctrine. It is a

\(^{53}\) F.No.P-20/1929, AICC Papers.

\(^{54}\) Interviews with:
N. Krishnaswamy, 10-7-89, Trichinopoly, Tamilnadu.
K.K. Nayar, 22-7-89, Cannanore, Kerala.
philosophy of life and as such also it appeals to me...."⁵⁵

Mrinal Kanti Bose in his presidential speech at the first session of National Trade Union Federation held in December 1933 quoted Jawaharlal Nehru as having said that "...Obviously the establishment of socialism or any form of social or political organisation can only be realised through securing control of the state. Therefore the immediate programme must be the one of gaining this control of the state apparatus by the masses, and not by any small group...."⁵⁶

Jawaharlal Nehru argued that though it was the duty of the socialists and other left forces to develop trade unions and class consciousness of the working class - to work for establishing socialism in India - the primary task of socialists was to fight for national liberation. To him the independence of India was primary and the question of socialist transformation of Indian society was secondary. It was his understanding that imperialism was a stumbling block in the development of the social, political, economic, cultural and intellectual development

⁵⁵. R.No.7: Reports of Indian National Congress, 49th session, 1936, NAI, New Delhi.

⁵⁶. F.No.79: N.M. Joshi Papers, NMM&L, New Delhi.
of India. Addressing the workers of M&SM Railway, in October 1936 Nehru observed: "...I believe and many of us believe that the present troubles and distempers of the world cannot be cured except by socialism.... For a socialist in India today the first and primary duty is to fight for the independence of the country. If he does not do so, he cannot be a socialist, however much he may talk about socialism." 57

Jawaharlal Nehru felt that the independence of India would mean ultimately the real solution to the problems of Indian people. Therefore, he wanted that the workers too should fight for the independence of India. He explained in October 1936 that

"Swaraj meant ultimately the power to redress the grievances of the people.... Therefore, it became necessary for the workers to work and fight for swaraj. The Indian National Congress was thus great organisation. It was fighting for swaraj. Therefore, it was necessary for them, whether they were peasants, workers, shopkeepers or others, to support that great national organisation in its fight for swaraj. The workers had also to carry on their fight at the same time as they carried on the fight for swaraj." 58

Nehru argued that the real strength of the National Congress lay in the teeming millions of the toiling class whether they were from rural or urban India,\(^{59}\) that the questions facing the development of working class organisation and its movement to improve its economic conditions and the national movement were the same. He argued that the ultimate problem facing the working class movement and the national movement was the removal of British imperialism and, therefore, he wanted an increasing co-class operation between the working and the National Congress. He observed that "... he only way out for labour was to fight for radical change which would give power. The labour method of fight was organisation and strike .... As a matter of fact the labour problem and the national problem were both coming nearer to each other and had to face the same ultimate issues - that is to say, the removal of British imperialism from India. No other solution will satisfy either or bring relief to the masses."\(^{60}\) He hoped therefore that there would be an increasing amount of co-operation between the two great movements.

\(^{59}\) F.No.4/36/36, Home Dept. Poll., NAI.

\(^{60}\) S.No.25, Report of Jawaharlal Nehru speech at AITUC undated, Jawaharlal Nehru Private Papers, NMM&L.
Nehru's emphasis on masses particularly the toiling classes of Indian society as the main agents in the social, economic and political transformation in India greatly appealed to the working class as well as the representatives of the working class.\textsuperscript{61} It was Nehru who gave a greater degree of currency to the socialist ideas among the leaders and members of the Congress.\textsuperscript{62} Consequently Nehru's espousal of socialism and his efforts to arouse the radical spirit of the toiling classes alarmed the Government of India.\textsuperscript{63} It was this integration of the working class problems with that of the nation's which left significant impact on the growth of working class political awareness. V.V. Giri addressing at general

\textbf{61. Interviews with:}
K. Murugesan, 27-6-89, Madras, Tamilnadu.
N. Krishnaswamy, 10-7-89, Trichinopoly, Tamilnadu.
C. Unniraja, 17-7-89, Trivandrum, Kerala.
K. Krishnan, 20-7-89, Calicut, Kerala.
K.K. Nayar, 22-7-89, Cannanore, Kerala.
P.C. Narayana Nambiar, 22-7-89, Cannanore, Kerala.
G. Satyanarayana, 17-8-88, Ellore, Andhra Pradesh.
J. Satyanarayana, 7-6-88, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.
Chokkar Pillai, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
R. Subramaniam, 11-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
S. Lakshmanan, 2-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
P. Chidambaram Pillai, 13-7-89, Vikramasinghapuram, Tamilnadu.

\textbf{62. Interviews with:}
V. Gopala Krishnaiah, 19-8-88, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.
P. Chengala Rayan, 28-6-89, Madras, Tamilnadu.

\textbf{63. Letters from Linlithgow, the Governor-General of India to Zetland, the Secretary of State for India, 27 Aug. 1936, 5 March 1937. Linlithgow Papers, Vol.II, NMM&L.}
body meeting of M&SM Railway employees union in July 1934 observed that "...It was a good sign that the Indian National Congress was now composed of people who believed in a socialist order of things...."64

D.

A significant section of the working class leadership in Madras presidency came from those who were convinced of the political role of the working class in the national movement along with the workers' struggle for their economic demands. This section of the leadership effectively widened the political awareness of the working class through their appeal to the anti-imperialist and anti-British capitalist sentiments of the working class. They also strove to advance the class consciousness of the workers through emphasizing the basic contradiction between capital and worker. Most prominent representative of this brand of leadership was V.V. Giri. The reasons for his joining the trade union movement were partly his concern for the conditions of the working class and partly political consideration. He explained the reasons for his joining the trade union movement thus: "...I should organise trade unions of workers so that, in case

64. The Hindu, 9 July 1934.
there was a rebellion in the country, I should make it difficult for the British Army to move about and thus impede their passage. And that was really the reason, I almost organised the trade unions...."\(^5\)

V.V. Giri strongly advocated anti-capitalist ideas among the workers.\(^6\) Speaking to the press workers of Vijayawada, he said that in the world there were only 10% capitalists and the rest were all workers.\(^7\) He believed that the solution to the problems of the working class lay in socialism. He explained to the workers that socialism was a cure for all the ills of the capitalist system. He said in 1933 that "it has been increasingly clear that the formation of a socialist party for India with a clear cut programme of action to defend the workers at every citadel of capitalism successfully against the master class, had been long overdue...."\(^8\)

In 1932, he told the workers in Vijayawada that the "...the establishment of the socialist state is our

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65. F.No.379, Oral Transcript, V.V. Giri, Interview recorded by B.R. Nanda and Dr. Hari Dev Sharma, 4 April 1975, p.39, NMM&L.

66. Andhra Patrika, 14 June 1929.


68. The Hindu, 29 July 1933.
immediate ideal. Protection of the workers' interests in every shape and form in the fundamental rights of the Constitution has to be strongly insisted...."^{69}

V.V. Giri wanted the working class not only to fight for their class demands but also to join the national struggle for independence. He asked the workers to be self-reliant^{70} and at the same time reminded them of their responsibility to the nation. He argued that British imperialism was the main stumbling block in the path of the healthy growth of trade union movement in India. He condemned the repressive measures of the British government and demanded "the introduction of a democratic form of Government immediately guaranteeing the fundamental rights of the workers...."^{71}

V.V. Giri consistently explained to the workers that economic swaraj and political swaraj were both interlinked and there could be no political or economic swaraj unless the fundamental rights of the nation were assured.^{72} The message was clear. He believed that unless India was free from British imperialist domination, the

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problems of the working class could not be solved and the achievement of socialism would not be possible. Also he was convinced of the fact that the only political organisation which could bring independence for India was the Indian National Congress. 73

Interestingly, when V.V. Giri became a minister for industries and labour in 1937, his ideas of anti-capitalism were moderated to a certain extent. His anti-imperialist stance, however, did not change. The reasons for change in the outlook of V.V. Giri were partly political and partly ideological. The assumption of political power, however limited, by the National Congress and his role as a labour minister between 1937 and 1939 partly influenced his outlook on issues of class conflict. Also the Congress government's emphasis on the policy of conciliation of the class interests of capital and labour and of the peaceful co-existence of all classes also helped change his outlook. And so, he observed in 1939 that "the employees were after all our brothers and equal citizens owning mills.... His advice to the workers was that they should think more in terms of unity and less in terms of

73. Andhra Patrika, 6 Aug. 1937.
Similarly, again in 1939, he explained in a meeting at Salem that the Congress government was for the interests and welfare of both the rich and the poor. During 1937-39, he also emphasized the policy of conciliation rather than confrontation. Speaking to the workers at Samalkot in August 1938 he observed that "strikes should be resorted to only when all other possible means were exhausted." He also began to argue that trade union principle should be the basis of labour organisation rather than socialist communist principles.

The more moderate trade union leadership worked for the growth of trade union consciousness among the workers and urged the workers to strengthen their organisations and to maintain unity. The capitalists were severely criticised for lack of concern for the problems of workers. B. Shiva Rao, a characteristically moderate leader, regarded the socialist or communist principles unsuitable to India, and believed that, with the mutual co-operation

75. *The Hindu*, 12 April 1939.
between capitalists and workers, most of the problems of workers could be removed. Shiva Rao emphasized the role of the trade unions in achieving benefits for the workers without necessarily resorting to strike action by workers. He vehemently pleaded for strengthening of the working class organisations and asked the workers to strictly adhere to the principles of trade unionism. Thus, in 1933, he explained to the workers of B&C Mills in Madras that lack of unity and weak organisation contributed to their greater misery. He also exhorted the workers to develop a spirit of solidarity with the struggles of workers elsewhere. He sought to promote the political consciousness of the workers by explaining the significance of the Karachi Resolution of the National Congress and the improvement in the condition of the workers that would take place in Independent India.

In 1932, he explained to the workers of Madura Mill in Madura the outcome of the deliberation of the Round Table

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83. G.O.No.1169L, PW&LD, 12/5/1934, TNA.
84. G.O.No.1436L, PW&LD, 28/5/1931, TNA.
Conference and the impending constitutional changes. 85

S.R. Varadaraju Naidu was another typical moderate working class leader from Madura, who functioned within the same ideological parameters within which V.V. Giri and B. Shiva Rao worked. He supported the National Congress like other moderate leaders and stressed the interlinkages between the improvement in the economic conditions of workers and the issue of independence of India. 86

The moderate leadership stressed the importance of trade unions and believed that trade unions with much less emphasis on strikes would be able to achieve greater benefit to the workers. They considered strikes only as a means of last resort. They regarded the growth of leftist ideology as undesirable and unwanted. 87

Significant contribution of the moderate leadership lay in developing anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist outlook among the workers of Madras presidency. By laying emphasis on the growth of trade unionism and the spirit

85. The Hindu, 4 Nov. 1932.
86. The Hindu, 16 June 1938.
of solidarity with struggles of workers elsewhere it promoted the consolidation of the class outlook of the workers. By explaining to workers the necessity of their participating in the struggle for independence as their fundamental duty, it also promoted political consciousness among them.

E.

The growth of the Communist Party of India and the Congress Socialist Party in Madras presidency added socialist dimension to the radicalism of the working class. The failure of civil disobedience movement, dis-solutionment with the Congress ideology and strategy of mass struggles, the contact with the Northern Indian revolutionaries both terrorist and socialist and the miserable economic conditions of the working class contributed to the growth of leftist ideology. 88

Prior to the establishment of any formal communist organisation, communism was advocated by individual leaders like M. Singaravellu Chetty. His contribution in the 1920s

Oral Interviews with:
K. Krishnan, 20-7-89, Calicut, Kerala.
C. Unniraja, 17-7-89, Trivandrum, Kerala.
K.K. Nayar, 22-7-89, Cannanore, Kerala.
R. Kissen, 4-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
K. Murugesan, 27-6-89, Madras, Tamilnadu.
G. Satyanarayana, 17-8-88, Ellore, Andhra Pradesh.
J. Satyanarayana, 7-6-88, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.
P. Venkateswarlu, 17-8-88, Jaggayyapeta, Andhra Pradesh.
to the beginning of communist movement in Madras presidency was undeniably remarkable. Attempts were made to start a Young Workers' League with communist ideology in 1932 by Amir Haider Khan, a convict in Meerut Conspiracy Case. The arrest of Amir Haider Khan led to the failure of the organisation to function. Following failure of the League, labour protection leagues emerged with the same ideology. The first of these leagues was formed in Guntur in March 1935. Other leagues were formed in Nellore, Masulipatam, Madras and Tenali between July and August 1935. A provincial League was formed on 18 August 1935 to co-ordinate the activities of these leagues with the objectives of safeguarding the interests of the working class and the poor in general and educating the workers. Also an important decision was taken by the communists on 24 November 1935 to enter the Congress to win over the socialists and other radical elements in the Congress.

There was also a simultaneous growth of the Congress Socialist Party from 1934 onwards. Krishna Pillai, A.K.

89. F.No.101, History of Freedom Movement: Extracts from Secret Reports Relating to Labour Unions, Youth Leagues, Left parties in Madras presidency, 1936-1940, TNA.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid.
Gopalan and E.M.S. Namboodripad from Kerala, N.G. Ranga, A. Kaleeswara Rao and Annapurna from Andhra, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyya from Mangalore, and K. Murugesan, P. Jivanandam, E.S. Ekambaram and B. Srinivasa Rao from Tamilnadu were prominent Congress socialists. It is however to be noted that some of them were already having communist leanings. The local Congress Socialist Party branches were formed in several places of Madras presidency from 1935 onwards. With the growth of communist and socialist organisations, working class organisations began to be formed by the left leaders for various classes of workers between 1928 and 1939.

The left forces represented by both the Congress socialists and the communists concentrated on developing awareness of working class through systematic analysis and explanation of the capitalist exploitation of labour and of the British imperialist domination of India. The left leaders in their work among the workers attacked the capitalists and their exploitation of workers. British imperialism was characterised by them as the main hindrance

in the path of the political and economic development of India. Radical political consciousness of the workers was sought to be promoted by them through personal contacts, regular holding of meetings for the workers, distribution of leaflets and other literature advocating socialist and communist ideas. As it is noted earlier, the growth of socialist ideas gained wider currency also because of Jawaharlal Nehru's espousal of the cause of socialism.

Intense propaganda and the spread of radical political ideas among workers was carried on by the left leadership, mainly after 1936. At the same time they also appealed to the workers to strengthen trade unions. The strengthening of trade unions was considered a fundamental duty of the conscious workers. Workers were told that weak organisation among the workers would only strengthen the capitalist hold on the workers.

94. Interviews with:
M. Veeraswamy, 17-8-1988, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
K. Narayana Rao, 7-6-1988, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.
J. Satyanarayana, 7-6-1988, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.
P. Venkateswarlu, 17-8-88, Jaggayapeta, Andhra Pradesh.
M. Arjunan, 27-6-1989, Madras, Tamilnadu.
E. Dalavai, 14-7-89, Vikramasingshapuram, Tamilnadu.
K. K. Nayar, 22-7-89, Cannanore, Kerala.
K. Krishnan, 20-7-89, Calicut, Kerala.

The left leaders in Andhra region repeatedly emphasized the growth of strong trade unions among the working class as they were essential weapons to fight the capitalist onslaught. At the first session of the Andhra press workers conference on 23 August 1937 Aswini Kumar Dutta focussed on the history of class struggles and asked the workers to strengthen their organisation.96 G. Guruswami, General Secretary of the All India Railway Labour Union, addressing the Tobacco workers of Chirala in January 1938 observed that "...the strength of the union depends upon the strength they gave to it by their collective loyalty, membership and organisation. Only if they were strong would their employers respect them..."97

Also, the leaders wanted the workers not only to develop and strengthen their organisation but also to actively support the national struggle by joining or by sympathising with the political programme of the National Congress. Speaking at the press workers conference at Masulipatnam, P. Lakshmipathi Sastry impressed on the workers the necessity of taking part in politics and organising themselves under the Red flag. P. Suri Sastry explained the significance of the Red flag and the

96. The Hindu, 26 Aug. 1937.
97. The Hindu, 6 Jan. 1938.
National flag.  

The left leaders explained to the workers that the economic problems of the working class and the issues of Indian independence were both integral aspects and the economic problems of the working class could not be redressed unless India was freed from imperialist domination.  

V.R. Kalappa addressing the workers as the president of first provincial labour conference held at Nellimarla on 8 and 9 April 1939 observed that "...There were 80 crores of foreign capital. The profits made by the capitalists were not retained in India because after a time they returned to their country. The wages of labourers in foreign country was greater than what Indian labourers got...."

The argument that economic problems of the working class and socialism were ultimately linked with the coming of independence to India always formed part of the speeches of the socialists before 1939. It was argued by the socialists that if socialism was to come in India, it

99. Interviews with:  
J. Satyanarayana, 7-6-88, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.  
G. Satyanarayana, 17-8-88, Ellore, Andhra Pradesh.  
P. Venkateswarlu, 17-8-88, Jaggyyapeta, Andhra Pradesh.  
M. Veeraswamy, 11-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.  
Y. Vijaya Kumar, 7-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.  
M.V. Bhadram, 7-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.  
K. Nagaiah, 19-8-88, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.
100. The Hindu, 11 April 1939.
was essential first to win independence for India. Thus at a study circle of Bhimavaram in 1936 the issues of socialism and "swarajya" were debated, and interlinked. 101

Addressing the Motor Bus Drivers' Union at Nandhyal in November 1937, P. Ramachandraiah asked the workers to organise themselves and hasten the dawning of "Swaraj" by supporting the Congress. 102 Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Railway speaking to the workers of M&SM Employees' Union branch at Bezwada in March 1936, emphasized that "...in the present political struggle in India labour was destined to play a very prominent part...." 103 In a speech at Bezwada on 1 May 1936, P. Venkateswarlu, a communist leader, made a virulent attack on British imperialism and declared that "...if we want to improve our financial position we have to resort to strikes. If we want to oppose the British government which is keeping us down, we can only do so by means of strikes." 104 In fact a case was launched against him for delivering speeches inciting workers to rise against the British government. 105

101. The Hindu, 19 March 1936.
102. The Hindu, 11 Nov. 1937.
103. The Hindu, 19 March 1936.
105. The Hindu, 17 Sept. 1936.
K. Murugesan, a member of the Congress Socialist Party and later a communist, told the Madras press workers in September 1937 that the British government, the police and the judges were all on the side of the capitalists and he asked the workers to understand that no good would come to the country until British imperialism was destroyed. He told the press workers on 19 July 1938 that liberation of India could not be achieved unless the workers themselves carried on their struggle through strikes. He was asked by presidency chief magistrate to execute a bond for Rs. 500 with the securities each for Rs. 250 under section 108 Cr. P.C. to be of good behaviour for his speeches.

One significant feature of the left propaganda was that while emphasizing the inter-relationship between the economic problems of the working class and the political problem facing India, an alternative form of society was presented to the working class in socialism. Workers were told that socialism was the ideal form of society where there was no place for exploitation of one man by

106. G.O.No.821, Pub. Dept. (Confidential), 27 April 1937, Translation of a Tamil speech delivered by K. Murugesan on 20-9-37, TNA.

107. Ibid.

108. Ibid.
another. T. Viswanathan, a Congress socialist, speaking at the first Andhra Congress Socialist Party Conference in February 1935, declared that socialism in India constituted a movement and a body of tendencies toward a better economic, social and cultural life for the people. 109

The left leaders in Tamilnadu laid great emphasis on enlightening the workers on the causes contributing to their miserable conditions. The workers were told that solution to their problems lay with them only and not with the labour leaders or capitalists. 110 Workers were continuously asked to recognize their interests and to fight for them. They were also told that it was only with the united action of the workers that they would be able to achieve their demands for a better economic life.

The radical working class leadership by highlighting the problems faced by labour and through explanation of the means to achieve improvement in their condition worked to bring about a transformation in the outlook of the workers. For example, the management of the East India Distilleries & Sugar Factory Ltd., Nellikuppam in their letter to V.V. Giri in 1938 complained that P. Jeevanandam, a Congress socialist and later communist,

110. The Hindu, 10 Aug. 1937.
addressed to the workers on capitalist and imperialist exploitation of the country after which loud cries of "inquilab zindabad", "Long live Revolution", "Down with Capitalism", "Down with British imperialism" were made.  

Widespread and intense propaganda was carried among the working class in Malabar region by the Congress socialists. The problem of "swarajya" and socialism were explained by the socialists in Calicut, Cannanore and Tellichery through a series of meetings. They also explained to the workers that socialism could be achieved only after the British imperialism was removed from India and that it was the Indian National Congress which was fighting for bringing independence to India. H. Manjunatha Rao speaking at the 5th annual conference of the Calicut Textile Workers' Union held at Calicut in July 1939 appealed to the workers to enrol themselves as Congress members and take their legitimate share in the fight for freedom. P. Krishna Pillai and K.P. Gopalan also appealed to the workers to strengthen the Congress.

111. G.O.No.2162, Dev. Dept., 2-9-1938, TNA.
113. The Hindu, 19 July 1939.
114. Ibid.
The leftist leaders in Malabar followed various means for raising the awareness of the workers. For instance, A.K. Gopalan led Jathas on foot in Kottayam and Karubranad taluks, delivering speeches all along and arousing the anti-imperialist sentiments of the people. He also led a batch of Hunger Marchers on foot to Madras starting from Cannanore on 1 July 1936 delivering anti-British speeches on the way. A batch of 16-member "unemployment jatha" was led in September 1936 from place to place. In all the jathas, he exhorted the working class to join together and act in the same manner as the working class in Russia did.\(^\text{115}\) He was sentenced to the central jail, Cannanore on 17-12-1936 for his activities.\(^\text{116}\)

The left working class leadership combined the problem of the working class, the issues of national independence and socialism in their endeavour to develop class consciousness of the workers. Several working class leaders told me in their interviews that the problems of working class and its struggle to better economic conditions were never separated from the question of India's struggle for independence in the process of

\(^{115}\) G.O.No.30, Pub. Dept. (Gen.) (Confld.), 6-1-1937, TNA.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
Several Congress leaders of the Madras presidency influenced by the miserable conditions of the working class took to the work of improving the conditions of the workers. Some of them started organisations for the workers. For example, the Chittivalasa Labour Union for the jute workers of Chittivalasa in Vizagapatam district was organised in January 1929 under the Presidentship of T. Viswanatham, a local Congress leader. The workers of Tobacco Company in Chirala were formed into a union called 'The Employees' Union of the I.L.T.D. Co.', in October 1937 by M. Yeghanarayana, President of Taluq

117. Interviews with:
K. Nagaiah, 19-8-88, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.
M. Veeraswamy, 11-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
J. Satyanarayana, 7-6-88, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.
P. Venkateswarlu, 17-8-88, Jaggayyapeta, Andhra Pradesh.
Y. Vijaya Kumar, 7-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
M.V. Bhadram, 7-8-88, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
G. Satyanarayana, 17-8-88, Ellore, Andhra Pradesh.
K. Murugesan, 27-6-89, Madras, Tamilnadu.
M. Arjunan, 27-6-89, Madras, Tamilnadu.
N. Krishnaswamy, 10-7-89, Trichinopoly, Tamilnadu.
R. Kissen, 4-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
E. Dalavai, 14-7-89, Vikramasinghapuram, Tamilnadu.
M. Ramamurthi, 8-9-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
S.N. Kaliannan, 3-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
K.K. Nayar, 22-7-89, Cannanore, Kerala.
K. Krishnan, 20-7-89, Calicut, Kerala.

118. F.No.L878(16), Dept. of Industries and Labour 1930, NAI.
Congress Committee, Baptala. Atmakuri Govindachari, a local Congress leader, formed a union for the workers of jute and cotton mills in Ellore in August 1934 and had himself elected as the leader of the union. In Guntur, the local Congress leaders made attempts to organise the workers in the cotton, and jute and paper mills in 1934 and 1935.

After 1935, the Communists and Congress socialists were more active among the industrial workers in organising them into trade unions. The Communists formed trade unions for press workers and organised labour protection leagues in Madras, Guntur, Nellore, Tenali, Bezwada and Eluru. Trade unions for press workers were mostly organised by the leaders from the labour protection leagues which were, in other words, Communist cells working for the spread of Communist ideology. Labour protection leagues also concentrated on organising workers in various other trades. After the formation of the Andhra Provincial Press Workers' Union by the Socialists, B. Venkatappaiah and G. Venkatatarayudu were deputed to enrol press 

119. G.O.No.448, Dev. Dept., 21-2-38, TNA.
120. G.O.No.1602, PW&LD, 15-3-1935, TNA. F.No.31/3/36, Home Dept., Poll., NAI.
121. G.O.No.66, PW&LD, 8-1-36, TNA.
workers of Guntur in the Guntur District Press Workers' Union.123 East Godavary Trades Council was inaugurated in April 1939 under the leadership of the district Congress Socialist Party with G. Venkatarayudu in the chair. Fifteen Trade Unions of the district were represented.124


The growth of left forces also signified rapid growth of working class organisations in Malabar region. H. Manjunatha Rao, a Congress Socialist, formed the Saw Mill Workers' Union at Kallai on 19 April 1937 and was elected as its president. The Cigar labourers' union was formed at Cannanore on 10 May 1937 with P. Krishna Pillai as President and K. Vannikrishna as Vice-President. Both were Congress Socialists. A Scavengers' Union of Tellicheri Municipality was formed with R. Janardhana Shenoy

123. The Hindu, 23 Sept. 1936.
124. The Hindu, 5 April 1939.
126. Samon Murphy, Unions in Conflict, op. cit., pp.184-85.
as the President on 25 July 1937. Also the Electric Supply Corporation Labourers' Union was formed at Cannanore on 26 July 1937 at the instance of P. Krishna Pillai and others. Moreover the period between 1934 and 1939 witnessed the emergence of working class organisations for the Soap factory workers, Cotton mill workers, Tile workers, Press workers, Beedi workers, weavers and Municipal workers in Calicut, Cannanore and Tellichery.

Apart from starting working class organisations, the Communists and Socialists started summer schools of economics and politics to propagate Marxism and communist ideology. These summer schools were set up in Guntur, Anantpur, Kurnool, Kistna, Rajamundry and Vizagapatam. Study circles were organised at Madras, Madura and Tuti­corin. Some of the prominent leaders connected with the starting of summer schools were N.G. Ranga and A. Kaleeswara Rao. It was sought through these schools to disseminate the ideas of communism and to distribute literature on communism.

128. Ibid.
129. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14; Fortnightly Report for the Second Half of July 1938, NMM&L. Erskine Collection, 15, 16, 17; F.R. for the first half of May 1939, NMM&L.
The spread of radical ideas among the working class was facilitated by the growth of radical literature and a radical press. The dissemination of radical ideas was not free and unrestricted due to the British government's repressive policy. Still radical literature did grow during the 1930s. The anti-imperialist movement, socialism and communism were the issues which were predominantly discussed in the radical press and literature.

In 1934-35, the 'Cooly Samrakshaka Sangham' (Workers' Protection Society) of Guntur, published a Telugu book "Dhana Prabhavam" which was 7th in order of a series of pamphlets. The pamphlet was a story of the intolerable conditions of workers under capitalism. It was demonstrated in the story the transformation in the outlook of workers from "The gradual evolution of credulous, unquestioning, religious, God-fearing and servile workers into self-conscious, self-respecting, inquisitive, irreligious, Godless, deficient, and dynamic socialist, yearing for freedom and transformation of the present capitalist society into a socialist order."

A Telugu translation of the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Engels was published in 1935. It was

131. G.O.No.2077, Pub. Dept. (Confld.), 4-12-1935, TNA.
titled *Kammunist Pranalika* and it was seventh in the series known as "the Adarsa Grandha Mala" of Yelamarry, Gudivada Taluq, Kistna District printed at Sri Panduranga Press, Ellore, West Godavary District. A book titled *Karmika Bhajanavali* edited by Swami Narayana Nanda printed at Panduranga Press, Nandiyal was proscribed by the British government, because it sought to promote class hatred, because it contained passages from the book entitled *Mala Palle*, a book written by Unnava Lakshmi Narayana in the 1920s, and because it reproduced some of the songs already printed in the defunct Telugu journal *Prabha* of Masulipatam. The following are the workers' songs contained in the book:

If all the workers unite, how can there be dearth of food for them? There is strength in workers alone in the present age. Say why we, who are workers, should have seats, Brother! Let us, workers live unitedly, Brother! Workers should unite.


134. Ibid.; G.O.No.2833, Home Dept., 22-10-36, APSA.
Another song:

There is beauty in strike alone.... If we carry on a strike, we shall get more wages easily. Strikes alone would hit our Sahukars (merchants) as hammer strokes. Strikes alone would serve as the unfailing weapon for all workers. Brother! Workers should unite.

Russia Viplavamu 1905 printed at Rajamundry and Paris Commune written by Mahindra Jagamohan Rao also printed at Rajamundry were Telugu versions of Russian Revolution in 1905 and Paris Commune. Paris Commune was an accurate translation of V.I. Lenin's book on The Paris Commune. 135 A German book Barricades in Berlin was translated into Telugu and titled Anna. It was published by Sri Ramamurthi of Bhimavaram, West Godavary District. It dealt with riots in Berlin 1929 which occurred when the communists celebrated May Day in contravention of a police order. 136 A book written by Ponnaluri Radha Krishna Murthi on The 1922 Ryot Revolt in Manyam (Alluri


Sitarama Raju) was published by Anna Pragada Kameshwara Rao. The author portrayed Sitarama Raju as a Communist hero and depicted the outbreak as a spontaneous revolt in the class war between the labouring classes and the capitalists. 137

Singaravelu Chetty's books on various subjects constituted major contribution to the growth of radical literature. He carried his ideas to the workers through his articles, pamphlets and books. Important among his works were the three pamphlets titled Swaraj for Whom? published between 1931 and 1934 from Madras. 138 The Tamil translation of Bhagat Singh's Why I am an atheist by P. Jeevanandam was banned by the Madras Government in 1935. Some other Kudi-Arasu publications were also banned. 139 In Malabar region, the Congress Socialist Party published in Malayalam May Day, Socialism What and translation of The Communist Manifesto. It may be noted that a conference of the Malabar progressive writers was held at Calicut on 12 June 1937 by socialists under the presidentship

137. History of Freedom Struggle in Andhra Pradesh: S.E. from G.Os. relating to C.D.M. in Andhra 1938. G.O.No.1451, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., 24-8-38, APSA.


139. Ibid., p.78.
of P. Narayana Nair, sub-editor, Mathrubhumi. Another important medium which helped the process of the radicalisation of working class outlook was the growth of the radical press advocating ideas of nationalism, class struggle and revolutionary programme for the working class. Vahini, Chitra Gupta, Prajamitra from Madras and Jyothi and Prabha from Masulipatam carried socialist and communist ideas through their columns. Swatantra Bharat, an illegal cyclostyled paper, published by Andhra Communist Party were widely distributed in Kistna and Anantapur districts. Copies of the "Communist" and Forward were also distributed along with Swatantra Bharat.

Communist ideas were in circulation in Tamilnadu from 1920s onwards owing to the contribution of M. Sinaravellu Chetty and E.V. Ramaswami Naicker who started the Self-respect Movement in the later half of the 1920s. The self-respect movement helped the growth of socially and

140. F.No.101, History of Freedom Movement: Secret reports relating to labour unions, op. cit.
141. F.No.18/11/39, Home Dept. Poll. 1939, F.R. for the second half of Nov. 1939, NAI.
142. F.No.18/12/39, Home Dept. Poll. 1939, F.R. for the second half of Dec. 1939, NAI.
politically progressive ideas. In fact, the growth of the Self-respect Movement and its popularity prepared the ideological ground for the growth of communism in Tamilnadu. Self-respect journals like *Vedigundu* from Madura and *Kudiarasu* from Erode, *Tozhilalai Murasu* from Madras fervently carried the ideas of socialism and communism among the lower classes. The Self-respect Movement achieved considerable results in propagating and popularising the ideas of socialism and communism in Tamilnadu region before the mid-1930s. There were other papers like *Desabandhu* and *Leader* from Trichinopoly which tried to promote a radical mentality among workers. The Self-respect Movement influenced some of the prominent Communists such as P. Jeevanandan, K. Murugesan and R. Kissen before they became activists of the Communist Party in Tamilnadu. 143

Similarly in Malabar region, *Mathrubhumi* from Calicut and *Prabhattam* from Shoranur carried propaganda on socialism and communism in their articles and columns. *Prabhattam* from Shoranpur ceased publication after eight months of its existence when security was demanded. 144 *Prabha*, a fortnightly, also ceased publication when security was

143. Interviews with:
R. Kissen, 4-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
K. Murugesan, 27-6-89, Madras, Tamilnadu.
M. Arjunan, 27-6-89, Madras, Tamilnadu.

144. G.O.No.598, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., (MS), 25-3-36, TNA.
demanded.\textsuperscript{145}

Through songs and articles, in 1935, Prabha attacked the capitalist system, British imperialism and exhorted the workers to fight for their demands.\textsuperscript{146} In 1933, \textit{Kudi Arasum} from Erode pleaded through its columns "revolutionizing the life, customs and manners of the people as well as the system of administration,"\textsuperscript{147} while \textit{Tozhilalai Murasu} of Madras lamented that the labourers did not take any steps to change the present form of social organisation even after realising that it was the main source of all their misery.\textsuperscript{148}

\textit{Mathrubhumi} consistently focussed on the ills of capitalism and imperialism. On 4 May 1935, it published a leading article on the significance of the May Day celebrations.\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Prabhatham} wanted that the struggle for independence of India must not cease and the struggle should be carried on with vigour. It argued that it was the workers and peasants who would win independence for

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Prabha}, Masulipatam, 20 April, 20 May, 20 June 1935, NNPR, TNA.
\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, Erode, 22 Oct. 1933, NNPR, TNA.
\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Tozhilalai Murasu}, Madras, 9 Oct. 1933, NNPR, TNA.
\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Mathrubhumi}, Calicut, 4 May 1935, NNPR, TNA.
\end{flushright}
It can be said that the process of the imbibing of radicalism by the working class was powerfully assisted through the creation of an ideological atmosphere of socialist and communist ideas by the local and regional journals and newspapers. There were also moderate nationalist regional and English newspapers which promoted anti-imperialist sentiments. These were Tamilnadu of Madras, Swarajya of Madras, Swadesamitran of Madras, Andhra Patrika of Madras, Lokopakari of Madras, New India of Madras, The Hindu of Madras and Indian Express of Madras. All these moderate nationalist newspapers by regular reporting of various issues relating to political, social and economic developments contributed to the process of the shaping of nationalist mentality among the people.

As a consequence of the heightened political propaganda and spread of radical ideas, the working class gradually achieved a certain degree of awareness of the working of the capitalist system and the consequences of the British imperialist domination of India.

I.

The growing awareness of the working class expressed itself in various forms. For example, in December 1936,

150. Prabhatam, Shoranur, 29 April 1935, NNPR, TNA.
a workers' meeting was held under the auspices of the Municipal Thozilali Union, Commonwealth Labour Union, Chirakkal Weaver Labour Union, Beedi Thozhilali Union, Baliappatam Labour Union and the Cannanore Town Congress Socialist Party "to voice the feeling that the labour had a right to organise itself into a labour union." 

In November 1936, the jute mill unemployed workers' sangham in Ellore organised a procession through the streets of Ellore and the unemployed men marched with Red flags in procession. There was a huge rally with 10,000 workers in Madras city on 5 March 1938, to express their solidarity with the 5 ex-workers of Tramways who were on hunger strike for the demands of workers. Red flags and Tricolour flags were flown side by side. In July 1938, workers' procession was organised in Madras by Congress Socialist Party, Madras Provincial Trade Union Congress, Western India Match Factory Workers, the Diocesan Press Workers and Tandiarpet Glass Workers with slogans like "Down with imperialism", "Down with capitalism" and "Victory to labour" in solidarity with the workers of Choolai mills

151. The Hindu, 26 Dec. 1936.
152. The Hindu, 11 Nov. 1936.
workers and Diocesan press workers who were on strike.  

During a strike in May 1938, more than 3,000 workers of the Chittivalasa Labour Union marched in procession carrying national flags and singing patriotic songs. In November 1938 workers of the Press Labour Union, Tramway and Electric Supply Workers' Association and Toddy Tappers' Union condemned in a public meeting the lathi-charge on workers of Mahalakshmi Mills in Madurai and the arrest of their leaders, Muthuramalinga Thevar and P. Jeevanandam. The Congress Socialist Party organised a procession of workers in Madras city on the 'anti-constitution day', i.e. 1 April 1937, when workers marched with red flags and placards with inscriptions, "Workers of the world unite", "Long live Revolution", "Down with the slave Constitution". On the day of 'anti-constitution Hartal', all the mills in and around Coimbatore town were closed for the day.

154. The Hindu, 2 July 1938.
155. The Hindu, 2 June 1938.
156. Congress Socialist, 20 Nov. 1938.
157. G.O.No.835, Pub. Dept. (MS), Confldl, 28-4-37, TNA.
158. F.No.18/4/37, Home Dept. Poll. Fortnightly Report for the second half of April, NAI.
All these instances demonstrate the increasing awareness of the working class. Also they bring out the growing influence of the left ideology on workers. The penetration of left ideology among workers and the growth of radical consciousness among them were further amply demonstrated in the celebration of May Day. The first May Day in the Madras presidency was celebrated in 1923 in Madras by workers under the leadership of M. Singaravelu Chetty and others. 159 Henceforth, May Day gradually came to be celebrated by the working class in several places of Madras presidency.

The celebration of May Day served to enhance the spirit of solidarity and increase the class consciousness of the workers. Examples of its celebration in 1938 may be cited. 160 May Day was celebrated at Calicut with A.K. Gopalan and K. Damodaran addressing the workers. Workers in Tellichery celebrated May Day under the auspices of the different labour associations and also paraded with red flags. P.K. Krishna presided over the meeting. The workers in Salem led demonstrations carrying Red flags and shouting "communist slogans". E. Sivahandam and

R. Natesan spoke on the significance of May Day celebrations. At Negapatam, Steel Rolling Mill Labour Union, Railway Labour Union and Socialist League celebrated May Day. V. Nagappa addressed the workers on the Day's significance. At Coimbatore and Trichinopoly, industrial workers celebrated the day. Most significantly, in Madura 6,000 industrial workers attended the meeting on May Day. The portraits of M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were taken in procession by the workers. In Andhra region too, May Day was celebrated at different places. Local labour unions celebrated it in Nandyal. In Ellore, press workers' union, Ellore Tanneries Workers' Union and other labour associations along with Town Congress Socialist Party and Town Youth League celebrated May Day.

By 1939, the working class in Calicut, Cannanore, Coimbatore, Cocanada, Negapatam, Nellore, Trichinopoly, Madras, Tinnevelly, Tellichery, Salem, Cuddalore, Pillachi, Rajamundry, Samalkot, Tiruppur, Vizianagaram celebrated May Day under the auspices of working class organisations and the left parties. 161

In addition, 'Lenin Day', 'Karl Marx Day' and 'Russian Revolution Day', came to be celebrated by the

161. The Hindu, 3 and 4 May 1939.
workers of Madras presidency. In 1935 and 1936 anniversary of 'Russian Revolution' and 'Lenin Day' were celebrated in several parts of Madras presidency. In 1938, 'Lenin Day' was celebrated in the city of Madras by Madras Provincial Trades Union Congress, the Madras Congress Socialist Party and the Madras Press Labour Union. The meeting was presided by A.S.K. Ayyangar and N.G. Ranga, and S. Someswara Rao spoke on Russian Revolution and Lenin.


162. F.No.18/11/35, Home Dept. Poll. P.R. for the second half of Nov. 1935; Also F.R. for the second half of Jan. 1936, NAI.

163. The Hindu, 18 and 19 March 1936.


165. The Hindu, 10 Nov. 1937.
on the occasion.\textsuperscript{166} Russian Revolution Day was also celebrated in Cocanada, Bezwada, Nellore and Gudiwada.\textsuperscript{167} The workers in Calicut marched in procession with placards and Red flags in celebration of Russian Revolution Day, P. Krishna Pillai, N.C. Sekhar and T.K. Raju elaborated the significance of the Russian Revolution.\textsuperscript{168}

J.

The growing consciousness of the working class, as a result of the process of politicization and imbibing of radical ideas was also expressed in industrial strikes. By 1939 the working class had learnt to articulate its grievances through frequent recourse to industrial action. For instance, industrial strikes which occurred in 1937 in the whole of Madras presidency involved a total of 60,900 workers. The number of working days lost in that year was 656,404.\textsuperscript{169} Also, significantly, the number of working class organisations increased from 13 in 1929-30 to 83 in 1937-38. The actual number of unions functioning at the end of 1938 was 54.\textsuperscript{170} The total membership of Trade Unions for 1929-30 was "probably" over 27,000;\textsuperscript{171}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{166} The Hindu, 11 Nov. 1937.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Sukomal Sen, \textit{op. cit.}, p.361.
\item \textsuperscript{171} F.No.31/32/31, Home Dept. Report on the Administration of Madras Presidency for the year 1929-30, Madras, 1931, NAI.
\end{itemize}
it increased to 49,372 in 1937-38. 172

An analysis of the industrial strike actions of the working class in textiles, railways, sugar, jute and tobacco industries and in various unorganised industries is presented here which would show how far the radical ideas imbibed by the working class (in the process of politicisation) between 1928-1939 period were translated into direct trade union action.

III

A.

Textile industry was mainly concentrated in Tamilnadu region. The main centres of textile industry were Madras, Madura, Coimbatore and Ambasamudram in Tinnevelly district. There was remarkable growth in textile industry during 1930s. With the growth in the number of work force, worsening economic conditions and the radicalisation process of 1930s, there emerged a powerful working class movement in textile industry by 1939.

There were numerous instances of working class struggles against capitalist attempts to attack the living

172. G.O.No.47, Dev. Dept., 6-1-39, TNA.
standards of workers before 1928. In August 1927 there occurred the combined resistance of textile workers in Coimbatore over the suspension of three workers in the Coimbatore Spinning and Weaving Mills. The workers of Mall Mills and the Kaleeswarar Mill also joined the strike. The total number of workers involved in the strike in the three mills was 4,800. The strike ended in total failure.

The working class movement in the textile industry before 1933 was very weak and most of the struggles of the textile workers were short and mostly unorganised. The main issues on which the workers struck work were wages, leave and hours of work in the factory. The general economic crisis in the economy, the weakness of the trade unions and the unfavourable political context all contributed to the weak state of working class movement in the textile industry.

The period between 1928 and 1934 was also marked by the mounting attacks of the capitalists on the working class living standards and its organisations in textile

173. Eamon Murphy, *op. cit.*, see Chapters 5 & 6, pp.81-125.
industry. The government's indifference and the British capitalists' apathy to the workers' plight was best reflected during the strikes of textile workers in Papanasam Mill and Madura Mill in 1930 and 1931. The workers in Papanasam mill demanded 30% general increase in wages, provision of 20 days sick leave in a year with wages, 15 days privilege leave with full wages for workers who had put in two year service and over, grant of maternity benefit, institution of the provident fund system and provision of educational and canteen facilities. The refusal of the mill management forced the workers to start a strike on 3 February 1930 which affected 2,000 workers. The workers in Madura mill struck work apparently over the question of transfer of a worker of 20 year service in the Roving Department on 19 March 1931. But the underlying reason was the non-recognition of the trade union headed by S. Varadarajulu Naidu and B. Shiva Rao. As the negotiations for settlement of the dispute failed and as the workers persisted in their strike, the mill management closed the mill on 23 March 1931.

176. G.O.No.703L, PW&LD, 27-2-30, TNA.
177. G.O.No.1166L, PW&LD, 8-4-30, TNA.
178. G.O.No.1454L, PW&LD, 30-5-31, TNA.
179. Ibid.
In both the strikes i.e. Papanasam Mill workers' strike in 1930 and Madurai Mill workers' strike in 1931, the British owners, namely, Harveys, showed total disregard for the demands of the workers and the government also assisted them by maintaining total indifference to the plight of the workers. The strike in Papanasam Mill ended after continuing for ten weeks and the strike in Madurai Mill ended on 3 May 1931. Both strikes failed without any benefit to the workers. B. Shiva Rao charged the government with indifference and lack of concern for the interests of the workers in both the strikes.181 There was also a strike in Choolai Mills in Madras when their counterparts in Papanasam Mill were continuing their struggle. The workers, who struck work in Choolai Mills in Madras in April 1930, had a number of demands such as increase in wages by 25% in all departments, provision of sick leave, promotion with experience, provision of adequate facilities.182 The strike affected all the workers and the mill was closed temporarily.183

180. Ibid.
181. Ibid.
182. G.O.No.1192L, PW&LD, 11-4-30, TNA.
The adamancy of the capitalists and the indifferent attitude of the government forced the workers to accept failure of their struggles. None of the above mentioned strikes succeeded in winning gains from the capitalists. It was during this period that the connection of the industrial workers with nationalism got further strengthened. The relatively low development of textile industry in Malabar was reflected in the weakness of the working class movement. The workers of the Malabar Cotton Spinning and Weaving Mills Ltd. situated at Tiruvannur in Calicut Taluq struck work on 9 February 1935. It was the first strike organised by the Malabar Congress socialists. 700 workers struck work over question of wages and dismissal of one worker. The strike was called off on 25 February 1935, after two weeks, when the management agreed to reinstate the dismissed worker and to increase the piece workers' wages by 6\(\frac{1}{4}\) per cent as a temporary measure for the losses they sustained due to the reduction of the working hours. The non-implementation of the agreement provoked a second strike on 11 November 1935.


A.K. Gopalan and P. Krishna Pillai both Congress Socialists were prominent in leading the strike. The strike failed after two months due to helplessness and starvation of the workers and failure of the efforts of the local town Congress president to settle the dispute.¹⁸⁷

There was a strike by 90 workers out of 250 in Messrs. Samuel Aaron and Sons weaving factory at Pappaneseri on 28 March 1935, over the question of dismissal of a worker. The strike was conducted under the leadership of the Congress socialist A.K. Gopalan and others. This strike too failed due to the employment of blacklegs by the management. All except sixteen workers were taken back when the strikers reported for work on the condition that the workers would not associate with the trade union started by the Congress socialists.¹⁸⁸

The years between 1934 and 1937 witnessed shortlived and spontaneous strikes in textile industry in the Madras presidency.¹⁸⁹ The conflict was mainly centred over the


¹⁸⁸ G.O.No.66, PW&LD, 8-1-36, TNA.

¹⁸⁹ G.O.No.651, Dev. Dept., 16-3-39, TNA.
question of victimization, recognition of working class organisations and inadequate wages. These years were however significant for the increasing politicization of the working class. It was during this period that the working class was being psychologically prepared for intensified resistance to the attacks of the capitalist class.

B.

The years 1927 and 1928 were significant for the railway worker in the sense that there was the growth of new political consciousness and increasing consolidation of left forces. There were militant working class struggles in Bengal-Nagpur-Railway workshop at Kharagpur and East India Railway Workshop at Lillooh against retrenchment during February 1927 and March 1928 respectively. In 1928, workers in South Indian Railway also became restive over the issues of "rationalisation and retrenchment." Long hours of work and extremely low wages, consequent low standard of living, deliberate racial

190. G.O.No.1455-56-57, Dev. Dept. (Press), 29-6-37, TNA.


193. Krishna Patrika, 14 July 1928, NMM&L.

discriminatory policy at various levels by the British Railway administration, and the impending British capitalist assault in the form of retrenchment forced the workers in South Indian Railway to launch a strike struggle to protect their interests. The railway authorities maintained that on account of introduction of new machinery in the workshops at Negapatam, Podanur and Trichinopoly, retrenchment was necessary. There was yet another strong reason underlying the policy of retrenchment. As a government official noted, retrenchment was "a cloak for victimization of abnoxious workmen particularly those connected with the labour unions." Similarly, P. Rothera, agent of S.I. Railway, stated on 16 July 1928: "I am quite prepared and have all the time been prepared to reopen the shops anywhere as soon as I have your assurance that when they are reopened you will work properly and will not go in merely to perform satyagraha."
The proposed retrenchment was to affect nearly 3,100 workers in the S.I. Railway. The Central Committee of the South Indian Railway Labour Union issued an ultimatum to the agent to withdraw the circular ordering retrenchment of workers failing which satyagraha would be offered within the workshop premises. The terms offered by the Railway administration and the trade test in matter of selection of workers in the process of elimination of workers from work were not accepted by the workmen. The unyielding and uncompromising stand of the Railway administration forced the workers to stage satyagraha on 29 June 1928 in all workshops at Trichinopoly, Podanur and Negopattam. This was followed by a lock out affecting 8,000 workers. Local secretaries at various centres were appointed and parties of strikers were sent in different directions to enlist the support of other local branches as well as the public.

The moderate leadership did not view favourably the launching of strikes by the workers, and it even suggested


that the strike was the result of manipulation by the left radical leaders to establish and strengthen their ideological hold over the workers. Ernest Kirk, General Secretary of the Madras Labour Union, condemned the strike action and warned the workers not to be carried away by communist ideas which were being imported into the union.  

Mukundalal Sircar, President, B.N.R. Labour Union and Secretary of the All India Labour Union, speaking at a meeting of workers held at Trichinopoly on 1 July 1928 blamed British imperialism for creating unemployment and for attempting to curb the working class activity. He also appealed to the Indian National Congress to help the workers as the mobilisation of the workers by the Indian National Congress in the strike would also help in facilitating the mobilization of the working class in the anti-imperialist movement and boycott of Simon Commission. He considered it a golden opportunity to forge and consolidate the links between the working class and the anti-imperialist movement led by the Congress.  

A complete hartal was observed on 6 July 1928 at Trichinopoly and on 9 July 1928 at Podanur. President

204. G.O.No.660, Pub. Dept., 6-8-28, TNA.
of the Central Committee of the Labour Union, Trichinopoly, suggested to the Agent arbitration by the Labour Commissioner on payment of lock-out wages, absorption of surplus men, increase of menial wages, and redressing of running staff grievances. As the principle of arbitration was not accepted on all demands the strike commenced on the night of 19 July 1928.206

The strike was transformed into a most militant form of struggle with several violent incidents taking place within four days of the beginning of the strike. Violent incidents took place at Tuticorin, Mayavaram, Villepuram and Trichinopoly. At Tuticorin, the strikers joined by factory workers came into clashes with the police force on 20 July. One worker died as a result of police firing. At Mayavaram on the same day a police party was attacked and several trains were held up. This was followed by the arrest of 63 strikers. At Villepuram strikers undertook satyagraha and the police party was stoned when it tried to intervene. There were shouts like "Kill the Dorai". The strikers resorted to satyagraha at Panruti also. This was followed by 78 arrests at Panruti, Vikravadi and Villekuppm.207 The most serious and significant


incident during the strike occurred at Trichinopoly when a bus collided with a light engine, which resulted in the death of several people. The incident provoked a gathering of nearly 10 thousand people composed of various sections of society along with strikers. The people wanted to see that the driver of the light engine who was an Englishman was also killed.208

The militancy of the working class was met with the repressive measures by the government. The deployment of vast police forces and prohibitory orders were designed to terrorise the workers and to limit the extension of public support to the strike movement. A public meeting called by the Madras District Congress Committee in Madras was not allowed to be held. P. Balasubramanya Mudaliar, a local Congress leader of Madras, stated that "...the meeting which I arranged also was to support and sympathise with the labourers of the S.I. Railway."209 The Madras District Congress Committee in a resolution condemned the order prohibiting the public meeting and characterised it "as a deprivation of the Fundamental Rights of citizens" and it also strongly criticized the

208. G.O.No.957, Pub. Dept., 30-10-28, TNA.
209. G.O.No.960, Pub. Dept., 30-10-28, TNA.
210. Ibid.
Government's attempts to suppress the strike. 211

V.V. Giri, General-Secretary of the All India Railwaymen's Federation criticized the repressive measures of the government as a manifestation of the "violent culture of the government in suppressing all constitutional activities on the part of both the Railwaymen or the responsible citizen of Madras." 212

There was a series of arrests of working class leaders beginning with the arrest of Singaravelu Chetty and Mukundalal Sircar on 23 July 1928. By 27 July members of the Central Executive Committee and the Strike Committee were arrested. Trade union offices were raided and ransacked. 213 Prosecution followed the arrest of the labour leaders and they were convicted to various terms of imprisonment. Perumal, a worker, was sent to Andamans and was released only during the Congress ministry period. 214 The widespread repression by the British government and the unyielding and stubborn attitude of the South India Railway

211. Ibid.
212. Ibid.
administration forced Krishmachari, the Secretary, and Pillai, the Treasurer, of the South India Railway Local Labour Union, who were not arrested, to call off the strike on 30 July 1928. On 2 August 1928 the Agent stated that recognition given to the union was being withdrawn and no pay for the strike period would be paid. He also declared that he had the full approval of the government and that none of the points of dispute were to be submitted to arbitration.

S. Satyamurthi, a Madras Provincial Congress leader, blamed the British government on two counts. He said that, on the one hand, the British government was inactive and indifferent throughout the period of negotiation and during the strike and, on the other hand, it completely identified itself with the South India Railway Company and terrorised the workers.

The vindictiveness of the South India Railway administration left an indelible impression of repression and a sense of despair among the workers. The workers admitted

before the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929 that "before we get permanent jobs we have to sign an agreement; it is stated in the agreement that we shall not join a union and we must not get into debt.... We had to sign this agreement before taking up permanent jobs.... There are so many conditions by which we are bound that we feel that joining a union would involve us in trouble.... Now that the Union is gone everything is gone."218

A few other features of the South India Railway strike of 1928 may be pointed out. It exhibited certain characteristics of the Luddite movement which was a feature of the early working class activity in the first half of England in the 19th century. The breaking of rail-tracks, stoning of trains and resorting to damaging the railway property tends to support this view. It may also be seen partly as a struggle against imperialist domination and exploitation of India as can be seen in the expression of anti-imperialist and anti-British sentiments of the workers during the strike. Consequently, National Congress in Madras lent support to the strikers.

A fairly serious strike against retrenchment took place in Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway toward the

end of 1932. The M&SM Railway was a state-owned but company managed industry like the S.I. Railway. There were spontaneous and shortlived protests by the workers from 1931 onwards over the proposed policy of retrenchment by the railway administration.\textsuperscript{219} Matters reached culmination in October 1932 when a strike commenced in the Mechanical Workshop of Perambur branch of the M&SM Railway company. The strike began on 24 October 1932 and was followed by a strike by the Engineering workshop employees of Arkonam on 3 November 1932 in sympathy with the Perambur branch workers' strike. The workers at the Mechanical and Electrical Workshop at Hubli also expressed their solidarity by going on strike from 19 November 1932.\textsuperscript{220} The main demand of the workers was for the reinstatement of the 93 workers discharged in the previous year and the stoppage of proposed retrenchment in the near future.\textsuperscript{221} The Railway administration replied that there was no question of the reinstatement of the dismissed employees.\textsuperscript{222}

The situation and intensity of the strike is brought out by the table given below.\textsuperscript{223}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{219} G.O.No.1686L, PW&LD, 2-7-31, TNA.
\item \textsuperscript{220} G.O.No.1461, PW&LD, 18/1/1937, TNA. F.No.918, Dept. of Industry & Labour, 1933, NAI.
\item \textsuperscript{221} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{222} G.O.No.597, PW&LD, 10-3-33, TNA.
\item \textsuperscript{223} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
The M&SM Railway Company Ltd. Strike Situation on 28 November 1932

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Workers on strike</th>
<th>Workers at work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Perambur Mechanical Workshop</td>
<td>5300</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perambur Electrical Workshop &amp; Services</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Arkonam Engineering Workshop</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hubli Mechanical Workshop</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>1630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hubli Electrical Workshop &amp; Services</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The railway administration was accused of inflating the figure of workers at work at Hubli workshop while the actual number of workers at work was not more than 500.\(^{224}\) Jamnadas Mehta in his statement observed that even at Hubli the strike would have been more thorough but for the tactics adopted by the Railway administration.\(^{225}\)

A most remarkable feature of the 1932 struggle of the railway workers of the M&SM Railway was the non-violent and non-communal character of the movement. It was a spectacular example of a non-violent strike under the moderate working class leadership in contrast to the

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224. G.O.No.597, PW&LD, 10-3-33, TNA.
225. The Hindu, 23 Nov. 1932.
more militant and violent struggle of the South India Railway workers in 1928 under the left radical leadership. The strikers donned "pure khaddar, the emblem of non-violence" during the strike and exhibited a high sense of discipline.\textsuperscript{226} The organizers of the strike were also able to maintain a non-communal character despite the efforts of the railway administration to divide the working class on communal lines.\textsuperscript{227}

Another significant aspect of the M&SM Railway workers' strike was the solidarity expressed by workers from different places within and outside Madras presidency. The workers in Bezwada, Betragunta and Rajamundry running shed expressed their readiness to go on a strike whenever they were asked so by their trade union.\textsuperscript{228} The Nizam Guaranteed State Railway Workers' Union contributed ₹200 for the relief of the strikers. Contribution from the workers of Donakonda, Guntakal, Pakala, Bezwada and Rajamundry branches were sent to the relief fund of the workers on strike. The workers of B.N. Railway Labour Union at Kharagpur collected ₹1,000 toward the strike relief fund.

\textsuperscript{226} The Hindu, 29 Nov. 1932.
\textsuperscript{227} The Hindu, 23 Nov. 1932.
\textsuperscript{228} The Hindu, 30 Dec. 1932.
by door to door collection. They also observed M&SM Railway Strike Day on 13 November 1932. The jute workers of Nellimarla, the workers of Buckingham & Carnatic Mills, workers of port trust and harbour workers also contributed to the strike relief fund.229

The strike of M&SM Railway workers also received sympathy from the working class outside India. The International Transport Workers' Federation, Amsterdam, the British Trade Union Congress, Railway Clerks' Association, National Union of Railways of Great Britain, and International Federation of Trade Union extended their solidarity through monetary contributions of £100, £50, £50, £100 and £25-18-0 respectively to the strike relief fund.230

The impasse in strike situation was broken when the Madras Citizens' Committee under the Sheriff of Madras intervened and tried to bring about a settlement. Jamnadas Mehta, speaking at one of the workers' meeting, wanted a settlement based "on honour and justice".231 V.V. Giri speaking from the same platform declared that "if the agent wanted honourable peace, they would honour. If

229. Andhra Patrika, 24 Nov. 1932. G.O.No.597, PW&LD, 10-3-33, TNA.

230. The Hindu, 30 Dec. 1932. G.O.No.597, PW&LD, 10-3-33, TNA.

he wanted war, they would give him war."\textsuperscript{232}

A settlement was finally arrived at on 23 December 1932 based on the proposals of Madras Citizens' Committee. Though some sections of the Central Executive Committee of the union disagreed with the proposals, V.V. Giri and Jamnadas Mehta prevailed upon them and brought about the settlement. The strike was called off on 8 January 1932.\textsuperscript{233} The settlement did not yield any benefit to the workers. Even V.V. Giri felt later that the Madras Citizens' Committee betrayed the workers.\textsuperscript{234} It was generally viewed by all shades of the working class leadership that "the workers have been grievously wronged."\textsuperscript{235}

The struggle of M&SM Railway Workers thus ended in a failure. In terms of the success, the two strikes of South India Railway workers and Madras & Southern Mahratha Railway workers were not different. One significant feature of the M&SM Railway workers' strike was that it was free from the brutal repression of the British government, and the workers were also able to wage a prolonged

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{233} G.O.No.597, \textit{PW&LD}, 10-3-33, TNA.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{235} The Hindu, 6 Jan. 1933.
battle, whereas the South India Railway workers' strike in 1928 was met with most inhuman repression and workers' militancy was quickly suppressed. The strike ended within just 10 days. While the character of the M&SM Railway workers' strike was by and large peaceful and non-violent and it was conducted on constitutional lines, the strike of South India Railway workers was more violent and militant. Both strikes were different in terms of leadership as well. Both strikes were significant when viewed from the angle of the ongoing process of politicization and the anti-imperialist activity in Madras presidency between 1928 and 1934. Workers in both the railway strikes exhibited a high degree of consciousness.

In both strikes, the railway administration maintained an uncompromising stand on the demands of the workers. The British government too wholeheartedly supported the railway administration. The commonness of interests between British capital and British government as against Indian workers was clearly demonstrated during the strikes. The Under Secretary of State for India openly stated in the House of Commons that the Government of India did not intend to appoint a conciliation board in connection with the strike of the M&SM Railway workers.236

236. G.O.No.597, PW&LD, 10-3-33, TNA.
There were no strikes in the two railway companies after the brutal suppression of the 1928 and 1932 strikes till 1939.

C.

The years between 1928-1936 could be seen as a period of shortlived protests by the sugar workers to improve their economic condition and to obtain certain privileges like sick leave and leave with pay. Workers of Messrs. Parry and Co. struck work on 29 April 1929 for 20% increase in their existing wages, introduction of provident fund and removal of rigid rules. The workers, however, returned to work on 1 May on the advice of B. Shiva Rao without achieving anything. Similarly 240 out of 246 workers of Vuyyur Sugar Factory in Kistna District went on strike on 1 August 1935 over the reduction of their wages. The workers returned to work on 8 August 1935 without achieving their demand.237

D.

Jute workers like their counterparts in other industries began to express their protest against the introduction of new rules, implementation of disciplinary measures

237. G.O.No.1768, Dev. Dept., 8-10-36, TNA. G.O.No.66, PW&LD, 8-1-38, TNA.
and inadequate wages from 1920s onwards.\textsuperscript{238} Workers in Chittivalasa Jute Mill in Vizagapatam struck work on 17 January 1929. The strike involved more than 2,000 workers. The demands of the workers related to the grant of a half yearly bonus and protest against long hours of work, arbitrary fines, low wages, and victimization.\textsuperscript{239}

In one of the workers' meetings, it was resolved to form a union under the name of "The Chittivalasa Labour Union". T. Viswanathan, a local Congress leader, was elected president of the union. This signified the growth of effective linkage between labour organisation and the Congress organisation. The Executive Committee of the union comprised of workers.\textsuperscript{240} The strike came to a successful conclusion following a settlement between the workers and the management. It was agreed, according to the settlement, that recognition of labour would be maintained as long as it worked on constitutional lines. The implementation of a 60 hours week, no victimization, 10% increase in wages to all those whose wages were below Rs.10-12 per

\textsuperscript{238} Royal Commission on Labour, 1929, Memorandum submitted by the Govt. of Madras, Madras, 1929, TNA.

\textsuperscript{239} F.No.2878(16), 1930, Dept. of Industries and Labour, NAI.

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid.
mensem and no pay for the strike period were also agreed.\textsuperscript{241}

The workers of Nellimarla Jute Mill went on strike on 28 January 1932 over the non-payment of half yearly bonus which was stopped on the alleged ground that the mill was incurring losses due to the recent flood.\textsuperscript{242} The workers decided in one of the meetings during the strike to form a workers' union. The Nellimarla Jute Mill Workers' Union was registered under the Indian Trade Union Act on 3 June 1932.\textsuperscript{243} The efforts of leaders like B. Shiva Rao to bring about a settlement did not yield any result. The management flatly refused all the demands of the workers.\textsuperscript{244} The workers resumed work unconditionally, calling off their strike on 28 March 1932.\textsuperscript{245}

The workers of Jute and Cotton Mills in Ellore struck work twice in the month of August 1934 as a protest against a 25% cut in their wages and for the reinstatement of their dismissed leader. The strike which occurred on 27 August 1934 involved 600 out of 800 workers. Atmakuri

\textsuperscript{241} F.No.G-95/1929, AICC Papers.

\textsuperscript{242} F.No.L918(28), 1933, Dept. of Industries and Labour, NAI.


\textsuperscript{244} The Hindu, 26 Feb. 1932.

\textsuperscript{245} G.O.No.L918(28), 1933, Dept. of Industries and Labour, NAI.
Govindachary, a local Congress leader, much against the wishes of the Mill management, formed a union of the workers and had himself elected as the leader of the union. The mill management demanded removal of the outsiders from the workers' union as a precondition for a settlement of the dispute. The workers, however, did not agree and A. Govindachary exhorted the workers to remain firm on their demands and cause. The strike, however, gradually started fizzling out as the management employed new workers in place of the old workers. The strike virtually came to an end on 14 September 1934.

The workers of Guntur Cotton & Jute Paper Mills were not organised till 1935 and the attempts of the local Congress leaders to organise the workers did not evoke any response from the workers. The low level of awareness and the object poverty partly explain the absence of workers' organisation. Despite the absence of an organization, there were two spontaneous and shortlived outbursts by the workers against unbearable exploitation. The strike which occurred in the second half of March 1935

247. Ibid.
248. G.O.No.66, PW&LD, 8-1-36, TNA.
over 15% wage cut ended on 25 March 1935 in the restoration of the wages. 249

E.

Tobacco industry was not a well developed industry in Madras presidency. The only big Tobacco flue curing company in the presidency employing more than 3,000 workers was located in Chirala. There were not many instances of Tobacco workers' strikes before the year 1937. There was an instance of a shortlived protest by the workers in Chirala India Leaf Tobacco Development Company on 12 April 1932 over the question of inadequate wages and the usual weekly bonus of Re.1 for each worker. The strike came to an end after 3 days with the management agreeing to pay the increased wages. 250 Later, a more serious and militant strike was to occur in 1938 in the industry over the accumulated grievances of the workers.

IV

A.

The years from 1937 to 1939 marked a heightened degree of industrial conflict in the textile industry.


The working class launched sustained and prolonged strikes in this period for getting their long standing grievances redressed. The basic factors for the militant nature of industrial conflict may be located in the return of economic prosperity to the textile industry, stagnation in the living standards of the working class, the massive spread of socialist and communist ideas and the assumption of ministerial power by the Congress in the year 1937 and the consequent expansion of civil liberties.

Textile workers of Buckingham & Carnatic Mills in Madras city launched strikes in the months of October 1937 and March 1938. The strikes were led by moderate leaders like G. Selvapathy Chetty. The first strike broke out on the question of a wage increase. The General Secretary of the Madras Labour Union in his letters to V.V. Giri, Minister for Industries and Labour, on 15 July 1937 and C. Rajagopalacharya, Prime Minister, on 26 July 1937 complained of the greater exploitation of the workers and of inhuman treatment by the mill management. The workers called off the strike on the Congress Government issuing a press communique delineating its policy toward the labour problems.


252. G.O.No.613, Dev. Dept., 10-3-38, TNA.
The settlement however proved temporary when on 3 March 1938 the workers struck work following the dismissal of a boy. This was followed by the dismissal of 140 half timers for refusing to work.\textsuperscript{253} The strike assumed a violent form when the mill management tried to play the communal card between Hindu and Muslim workers of the mill. It was in this context that the influence of the left element came to be felt.\textsuperscript{254} The Madras Labour Union leadership represented by moderate elements, like G. Selvapathy Chetty, failed to retain the confidence of the workers and in turn the workers looked to the left leadership. An appeal was made by G. Selvapathy Chetty in a nationalistic tone to C. Rajagopalachary to intervene in the strike but this did not yield any result. He wrote in his letter to C. Rajagopalachary on 9 March 1938: "in the mills police Raj prevails, will you allow this to continue under your regime? We devoutely hope not."\textsuperscript{255}

Interestingly, the limited concession offered by the Buckingham & Carnatic Mills was readily accepted by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{253} G.O.No.1117(MS), Dev. Dept., 29-4-38, TNA.
\item \textsuperscript{254} National Front, 8 May 1938, NMM&L. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for the first half of March 1938, NMM&L.
\item \textsuperscript{255} F.No.186, G. Selvapathy Chetty Private Papers, NMM&L.
\end{itemize}
the moderate leadership to bring the strike to an end so that the increasing influence of the left elements among the workers could be contained. It was a defeat for the boy workers and for the Madras Labour Union.  

The long pending question of increase of wages forced the workers of Choolai Mills in Madras city to launch strikes in 1938 and 1939. The Congress government appointed a conciliation board on 11 February 1938 "to investigate the points of dispute" between the mill workers and the management. Dissatisfied with the findings of the board, the workers went on strike on 16 June 1938; the strike continued till 20 July 1938. The strike affected 2,145 workers. The main demands of the workers were increase of wages, introduction of provident fund, grant of sick leave with allowance, etc. The strike was, however, called off on the appointment of a government official to examine the question of the increase of wages. He too supported the conclusion of the conciliation board that the Choolai company was not in a position to meet the demands of the workers.

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260. G.O.No.3010, *Dev. Dept.*, 5-12-38, TNA.
Vexed at the failure of the Congress government to find an acceptable solution to their problems, the workers of Choolai Mills came out again on strike on 9 February 1939. Now the grievances of the temporary workers were also added to the list of the demands. The strike involved 2,700 workers.\footnote{261}{G.O.No.1327, Dev. Dept. (MS), 22-5-39, TNA.} Even the domestic servants, foremen and lampmen joined the strike and the mill was closed.\footnote{262}{Ibid.} The moderate leadership, not happy with "the hasty action" of the workers, criticized the workers for having gone on strike without notice to the labour union. The dissatisfaction of the workers with the moderate leadership led to an increase in the influence of the left among the workers.\footnote{263}{Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for the first half of March 1939, NMM&L.} The Congress government also in its press communique of 5 March made it clear that it considered the strike as "ill-advised".\footnote{264}{G.O.No.1327, Dev. Dept., 22-5-39, TNA. G.O.No. 2109, Dev. Dept., 25-8-39, TNA.}

The moderate leadership finally found itself in an unpleasant situation due to the uncompromising and unyielding attitude of the mill management and the lack
of support from the Congress government. The strikers resorted to picketing which resulted in the arrest of 104 workers. The failure of the moderate leadership and the seriousness of the strike situation increased the influence of the left leadership of Chakkarai Chetty and Kalyana Sundara Mudaliar. The final blow to the determined and prolonged battle of the workers came when the Choolai Mill management informed the government on 13 July 1939 that the mill was going into voluntary liquidation from 8 May 1939. 265

The Congress government felt that it could not do anything in the situation. C. Rajagopalachary in his note to V.V. Giri, 4 April 1939, observed that "it would be useful to inform the general public and the labourers that there is no more use in agitation and that strikers can go home or find other employment instead of carrying on demonstrations." 266 Sharply differing from C. Rajagopalachary, V.V. Giri observed on 1 April 1939, that "we must attempt and see that the mill works again. I told the workers long ago that they were harming themselves by this direct action. Anyway we must protect

265. G.O.No.1327, Dev. Dept., 22-5-39, TNA.
266. Ibid.
the workers as against themselves. It results in the 
unemployment of two thousand six hundred and consequent
starvation of so many people."267

There were also sharp differences over the release 
of workers and leaders who were arrested in connection 
with the strike. The Governor of Madras presidency wanted 
more discrimination to be shown in the release of priso-
ners.268 V.V. Giri took the stand that all those impri-
soned during the strike must be released immediately. He 
observed on 5 April 1939 that "we cannot allow the poor 
families of these workers to suffer any longer."269 C.
Rajagopalachary felt that the question of release of 
prisoners might be taken up separately.270 The involve-
ment of the left radicals and the militancy of the workers 
were to some extent responsible for the aloofness of the
government. Also the adamancy and unyielding attitude 
of the Choolai Mill management drove the Congress govern-
ment further to the position of helplessness. The failure 
of the strike and the closing of the mill left 2,600 
workers unemployed.

267. Ibid.
268. Linlithgow Papers, Vol. No. 67, Erskine to Linlithgow, 8 March 1939, NM&L.
269. G.O.No.1327, Dev. Dept., 22-5-39, TNA.
270. Ibid.
The struggles of the textile workers in Madura and Papanasam marked a new phase in workers' militancy during 1937 and 1938, that is the period of the Congress ministry. The simmering conflict over the non-recognition of the workers' organisation, inadequate wages and other demands forced the workers to launch several strikes in 1937 and 1938. The changed political and ideological context and the creation of the psychological atmosphere of freedom and liberty contributed to the beginning of this new phase of militancy among the workers.

There were shortlived strikes in Madura in the month of September 1937 over the question of introduction of the system of two weeks' night work and one week's day work, and in Papanasam in the month of November 1937 for increased wages and leave with allowance.271

The decisive confrontation became unavoidable by the unyielding attitude of the British capitalist. The workers of Papanasam Mill struck work on 2 January 1938 for wage parity with the Madura workers and for reinstatement of 13 dismissed workers.272 The 10,000 strong workers

272. G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
meeting held in the second week of January 1938 at Madura decided in favour of a strike in Madura also. On 10 January 1938, the Madura Labour Union gave notice to the Harvey Mills management of a strike in support of the Papanasam workers' demands and on the ground that the management had not implemented the findings of the Madura Court of Enquiry. The strike started on 26 January 1938 following the suspension of a labour "volunteer" on ground of indiscipline.

The mill was closed. Regular meetings of the workers were held by the Madura Labour Union. S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu in one of the meetings held on 6 February 1938 explained to the workers about the increase in wages of workers in Bombay and Ahmedabad. He asked them to be firm in their resolve and requested them "to quit Madura town... and not to think of the mills for the present." Somasundara Pillai, a local Congress leader, spoke to the workers on the help from the Congress ministry.

A remarkable feature of the strike of the Madura workers was the solidarity it evoked from the workers in other mills situated in and around Madura town. A sum of

274. G.O.No.904, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., 28-5-38, TNA.
275. Ibid.
Rs.7,551 was collected for the strike from the workers of Madura, Meenakshi, Mahalakshmi and Raja mills.\textsuperscript{276} 700 out of 900 workers of Pandyan Mill struck work on 16 April 1938 in sympathy with Madura workers on the pretext that their demand for holiday was not granted. The workers resumed work on the following day following the advice of S.V. Varadarajulu Naidu.\textsuperscript{277} The workers of the Madura mills and sympathisers from Sri Meenakshi Mill numbering about 12,000 went in procession carrying flags. A large number of women also participated.\textsuperscript{278}

The Madura workers' strike was also actively supported by the local Congress in Madura and Papanasam. Somayajulu, a local Congress leader, speaking on 11 February 1938 in one of the meetings of the workers supported the strike and said that the British imperialism was helping the British capitalists. In another meeting, Vaidyanathaa Ayyar, also a prominent Congress leader of Madura told the workers that a meeting of the local Congress Committee was held for enlisting the sympathy of the public and informed the workers that the Premier had subscribed Rs.50 to the workers' relief.\textsuperscript{279} Town Congress Committee

\begin{footnotes}
\item 276. Ibid.
\item 277. Ibid.
\item 278. The Hindu, 25 Jan. 1938.
\item 279. G.O.No.904, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., 28-5-38, TNA.
\end{footnotes}
organised fund collection from the public for the workers' relief. Such direct identification with the workers' cause by the Congress leaders helped sustain the determination of the workers on strike. The Congress Socialists were also active among the workers explaining that improvement in their social condition would be brought out only in a socialist state. One significant feature of the strike was that despite indications of some communal feelings, the strike was not affected by the communal polarization.

A massive and organised propaganda work was undertaken by the strikers. A batch of 80 volunteers went to Tinnevelly carrying placards with the slogans of "Down with imperialism", "Long live Revolution" and "Help the strikers to success". A public meeting was held on 7 February 1938 in Tinnevelly, in which the local Congress leader, R.S. Thirumalaikovendu Pillai, told the workers that "the Congress party was bound by the Karachi Resolution to support the cause of labour against capitalism and imperialism." In pursuance of a resolution of the

280. G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
281. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. of Govt. of Madras for the second half of March 1938, NMM&L.
282. G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
283. Ibid.
District Congress Committee, "Papanasam strike day" was observed at Palamkottaih, Metapalayam, Tuticorin, Vikram-singhapuram, Ambasamudram, and other places in Tinnevelly district. 284 Tuticorin workers in a meeting passed a resolution sympathising with the workers of Papanasam mill. 285 Processions of workers were taken and there were incidents of workers resorting to cutting of telephone lines. 286

The Madura Mills management put up a notice to the effect that the mills would be opened on 20 April 1938. The intransigent move of the Harveys evoked an unusual and historically significant response from the Congress government which wanted a settlement to be reached before the opening of the mills. 287 The Congress government much to the displeasure of Governor of Madras presidency and Governor-General of India clamped section 144 Cr. P.C. on 19 April 1938, inside the Harveys mill management so that the management could not gather more than 5 workers

284. Ibid.
286. G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
287. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. Telegram dt. 19 April 1938, from Chief Secretary to the Governor. Linlithgow Papers, Vol.65, Erskine to Linlithgow, Telegram 29 March 1938, NMM&L.
inside the mill for running it. 288

Governor-General, Linlithgow, wanted that the use
of section 144 Cr. P.C. "should be discouraged" as it meant
employing "in a new field a provision which Congress
prefers to regard with disapproval" and its use was "unfair
to the employer". 289 Governor of Madras presidency,
Erskine, regarded the use of section 144 Cr. P.C. as
"most unusual" and warned the Congress ministry of serious
trouble "if they themselves got mixed up in trade dispute." 290
Though Erskine felt that the employers were "probably in
the wrong", he doubted the legal basis of the use of section
144 in the particular instance. 291 V.V. Giri explained
in his recollection after 37 years of the strike how the
British government opposed the use of section 144 Cr. P.C.
against a British capitalist. 292

288. G.O.No.904, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., 28-5-38, TNA.
    G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.

289. Linlithgow to Erskine, 7 April 1938; Erskine
    Collection, F.No.11, 12, 13, 14, NMM&L.

290. Erskine to Linlithgow, 29 March 1938, Linlithgow
    Papers, Vol.65, NMM&L.

291. Erskine to Linlithgow, 3 April 1938, 30 March 1938.
    Linlithgow Papers, Vol.65, NMM&L.

292. F.No.379, Oral Transcript, V.V. Giri, Interview
    recorded by B.R. Nanda and Dr. Hari Dev Sharma,
    NMM&L.
The perplexed and recalcitrant Harveys accepted negotiations for the settlement of the dispute following the stern action of the Congress government. According to the settlement it was decided to refer the question of wage increases to Papanasam workers to the Commissioner of Labour whose award was to be final and binding. It was also decided to refer the question of reduction of night running to him though making his decision binding. Section 144 Cr. P.C. was withdrawn following the settlement of the trade dispute and the mills at Madura and Papanasam were reopened on 24 April 1938. D.N. Strathie, Commissioner of Labour, appointed as arbitrator on 21 April 1938 submitted his report on 5 May 1938.293 His award recommended a one rupee increase in the wages of full time spinners, doffers and winders and a quarter of a pie increase for reelers which meant a little over a rupee per mensem on the average.294 Night shift was to be continued until the end of August. Above all, the most significant gain of the workers was the recognition of their trade union at Papanasam and Madura with S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu as Secretary.295 Other benefits such

293. G.O.No.1384, Dev. Dept., 30-5-38, TNA.
294. Ibid. Also G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
295. G.O.No.1384, Dev. Dept., 30-5-38, TNA.
as six days' leave and seven days' medical leave during a year were also granted. 296

The struggle of the Madura and Papanasam workers were seen as a part of the struggle against British imperialist and British capitalist exploitation of India and Indian workers. The wholehearted support of the Congress government for political and ideological reasons, the local Congress Committee's identification with the cause of the workers and the public sympathy with their demands made it possible for the workers of Madura and Papanasam to achieve a historic victory over British capital. The support extended by the Congress government to the Harvey mill workers' strike further strengthened the pro-Congress attitude of the workers in Madura. 297

The 1938 struggle of the Mahalakshmi Mill workers in Madura presents a contrast from the struggle of Madura and Papanasam workers in the respect of Congress government's support to the workers' strike and the leadership of the workers. The mills owned by Indian capitalists were started in 1930 and provided employment to 500

296. G.O.No.904, Pub. (Gen.) Dept., 28-5-38, TNA.
297. Oral Interviews: Chokkar Pillai, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu. M. Veerannan, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu. S. Muthaiah, 9-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
workers. The low economic standards and the struggles of workers in Madura and elsewhere enboldened the spirit of the workers in the Mahalakshmi Mills. They struck work on 13 October 1938, and continued the strike till 5 November 1938 when an agreement was reached between the workers and the Mill management.

What was specific about the strike was the utter callousness exhibited by S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu and the ambivalent stand of the Congress government towards a settlement. It was in this context that socialist influence grew among the workers through the involvement of Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar, a socialist and a member of Legislative Assembly. The active support of the Tamilnadu Congress Committee and the determination of the workers forced the government to intervene in the dispute and caused a settlement to be brought about. Following the settlement, the discharged workers were taken back and slight increase in wages was granted to the workers.

A notable feature of the strike was the growth of left influence among the workers as it was reflected

298. Eamon Murphy, Unions in Conflict, p.182.
299. G.O.No.2109, Dev. Dept., 25-8-39, TNA.
in the formation of a workers' union on 17 July 1938.  

An interesting feature of the period between 1937 and 1939 was the pro-moderate leadership stand of the Congress government. This stand of the Congress government was amply demonstrated in the context of the Madurai mill workers' strike in April 1938. Also another significant aspect of the period was the struggle for ideological hegemony over the working class between the moderate working class leadership and the growing left radical leadership. The struggles of workers in the Mahalakshmi Mills, toward the end of 1938 and the Choolai Mills in the beginning of 1939 were good examples in this regard. Another example of this was the struggle of the workers in the Indian-owned Sri Meenakshi Mills in Madurai. Some 800 out of 2,200 workers struck work on 10 March 1939. The court of enquiry into the dispute observed later that the real cause of the struggle was "the management's refusal to recognise the Madura Labour Union" represented by S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu.  


301. G.O.No.1188, Dev. Dept., 5-5-39, TNA. G.O.No.771, Dev. Dept., 28-3-39, TNA.
by Congress socialists called upon the workers not to strike and they even supplied labour to run the mills.\footnote{302}

Both contending parties came to an understanding over the appointment of a court of enquiry on 23 March 1939 on the intervention of the Congress government. D.N. Strathie, appointed as the court of enquiry, was critical of the strike sponsored by S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu. He recommended that out of 5 dismissed workers only 3 workers should be reinstated. On the question of the reinstatement of 800 strikers, he observed that "they do not deserve to be reinstated."\footnote{303} V.V. Giri with his pro-worker attitude and his inclination to save S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu's influence among the workers declared that "the punishment does not fit in with the crime."\footnote{304} C. Raja-gopalachary too considered putting some amount of pressure "on this recalcitrant mill manager", Sri Thayagaraya Chetty, but he too was frustrated. He observed on 8 September 1939, that "we can do nothing in this case. We may let things go on as at present."\footnote{305} The division in the ranks of working class, the support of the socialists to the capitalists in their drive to eliminate the

\footnote{302}{G.O.No.771, Dev. Dept., 28-3-39, TNA. Eamon Murphy, \textit{op. cit.}, p.190. \textit{Erskine Collection}, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for the second half of March 1939, NMM&L.}

\footnote{303}{G.O.No.1188, Dev. Dept., 5-5-39, TNA.}

\footnote{304}{\textit{Ibid}.}

\footnote{305}{\textit{Ibid}.}
influence of S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu and establish their supremacy and the helplessness of the government in the context of the unyielding attitude of the employers resulted in the complete failure of the workers' strike in Sri Meenakshi Mills.

The Textile workers in Coimbatore were not yet divided ideologically in 1937. The left radical leaders had intensified their efforts for the radicalization of the workers and were very active in championing their cause. Miserable economic conditions and the creation of a relatively free political, ideological and psychological atmosphere for articulation of workers' interests were responsible for the starting of the first general strike in Coimbatore in 1937. The strike started with the workers in Sarada Mills striking work on 27 October 1937, over the demand for annual bonus. This triggered off strikes in other mills of Coimbatore, as the following table brings out. 306

Mills affected by the First General Strike, in Coimbatore, 1937

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Mills</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Full strength</th>
<th>Workers involved</th>
<th>Date when began</th>
<th>Date when ended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarada Mills</td>
<td>Kurichi</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>27-10-37</td>
<td>30-10-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murugan Mills</td>
<td>Singanallur</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>30-10-37</td>
<td>04-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radhakrishna Mills</td>
<td>Peelamedu</td>
<td>1728</td>
<td>1728</td>
<td>30-10-37</td>
<td>04-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janardhana Mills</td>
<td>Singanallur</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>30-10-37</td>
<td>04-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Coimbatore Mills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Mills</td>
<td>Uppilipalayam</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>31-10-37</td>
<td>04-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Vasanta Mills</td>
<td>Singanallur</td>
<td>1366</td>
<td>1366</td>
<td>30-10-37</td>
<td>04-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cambodia Mills</td>
<td>Irugur</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>31-10-37</td>
<td>04-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pioneer Mills</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>03-11-37</td>
<td>03-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sri Ranga Mills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vilas Ginning Mills</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>822</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>03-11-37</td>
<td>03-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The C.S.&amp;W. Mills</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>2997</td>
<td>2997</td>
<td>28-10-37</td>
<td>14-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kaleeswara Mills</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>29-10-37</td>
<td>13-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Soma Sundaram Mills</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>03-11-37</td>
<td>13-11-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lakshmi Mills</td>
<td>Pappanaikkenpalayam</td>
<td>1132</td>
<td>1132</td>
<td>08-11-37</td>
<td>13-11-37</td>
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The intensity of the general strike can be gauged from the fact that it involved nearly 12,000 workers. The strike was led by both the moderate and the left radical leaders.

The Congress government alarmed by the situation created by the general strike immediately intervened. It issued a press communique appealing to the workers to call off the strike. V.V. Giri as labour minister and N.G. Ramaswami Naidu, M.L.A. and a moderate leader of the strike, personally appealed to the workers to call off the strike. As a result, workers in seven mills resumed work on 4 November 1937. The radical left leadership accused N.G. Ramaswami Naidu and V.V. Giri of sabotaging the working class movement and charged them with compromising with the Indian capitalist class. As was seen in earlier instances, the Congress government did not view favourably the spread of the influence of radical left among the working class. C. Rajagopalachary observed in this regard that "...I have also suggested some steps

308. G.O.No.448, Dev. Dept., 21-2-38, TNA.
309. F.No.G.92/1937, AICC Papers, NMM&L.
to put the mischief makers out of action."  

However, workers in other mills under left leadership too called off the strike following the Government press communiqué on 9 November 1937. The Government announced that a court of enquiry would be set up to enquire into the grievances of the workers in Coimbatore textile industry. M. Venkataramayya, acting District and Session Judge of North Malabar, was appointed as the court of enquiry on 29 December 1937. The enquiry report which ran into 100 pages concluded that the Coimbatore mill industry was in a position to bear the burden of a general increase in wages. It was recommended that no skilled workers should be paid less than Rs.13 per month and no unskilled workers less than Rs.11, excluding regular attendance bonus of Rs.2 and Re.1 per month respectively. Increase in wages ranging from 5 per cent to twenty-five per cent for workers getting below Rs.30 were recommended. Benefits like the abolition of multiple shifts, the grant of nine days sick leave and six days casual leave in a year, recognition of every registered union, a machinery for the avoidance of trade disputes and measures

310. G.O.No.2560, Dev. Dept., 16-11-37, TNA.
311. The Hindu, 23 May 1938.
312. Ibid.
for providing various amenities such as housing, medical relief, education, etc., were among the other recommendations of the court of enquiry. The Congress government in its press communique "generally" endorsed the recommendations of the court of enquiry. 313

The capitalists, however, believed that the report was through and through pro-worker. 314 The South India Millowners' Association at a meeting in Coimbatore declared that "the increases recommended by the court of enquiry are in excess, considering the reduced wages paid by the mills in other districts and the capacity of the mills to pay such increases." 315 The working class organisations arrived at a different conclusion and felt that the increased wages were inadequate. In a resolution passed at a meeting of the workers, the Coimbatore Mill Workers' Union declared that "the increase in wages recommended are very inadequate.... In view of the fact that a popular Congress ministry has generally agreed with the recommendations the Executive Committee resolved to recommend the recommendations to the acceptance of the

313. Ibid.
314. G.O.No.2059, Dev. Dept., 23-8-38, TNA.
315. The Hindu, 30 May 1938.
workers.\textsuperscript{316} The Hindu in its editorial observed that "Mr. Venkataramayya's conclusions and recommendations completely vindicate the claim of the textile workers in their desire to more generous treatment not only in regard to wages, but also in the matters of working class amenities."\textsuperscript{317} Later, there were numerous complaints by workers' organisations over the tendency of the employers to evade the recommendations of the court of enquiry.\textsuperscript{318}

An important consequence of the general strike was the growth of awareness and spirit of solidarity among the workers. The District Collector of Coimbatore observed that workers "do not want to be subject to discipline and are becoming overbearing. If they continue to behave as they are doing, they are riding for a fall. They are being encouraged by their so-called leaders."\textsuperscript{319} The Manager of Sri Ranga Vilas Mills complained of the growing spirit of disobedience among the workers. He observed that "any slight attempt to put the same in order leads immediately to an assembling of all labourers and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{316} The Hindu, 31 May 1938.
\item \textsuperscript{317} The Hindu, 23 May 1938.
\item \textsuperscript{318} G.O.No.902, Dev. Dept. (MS), 5-4-39, TNA. G.O.No. 3024, Dev. Dept., 14-12-39, TNA.
\item \textsuperscript{319} G.O.No.2059, Dev. Dept., 28-8-38, TNA.
\end{itemize}
stoppages of all machines. They have now also taken to
the practice of shouting their slogans inside the mills,
viz. 'Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai', 'Up with Revolution', 'Down
with Capitalism' and so forth."

There were several industrial conflicts in Coimbatore
in the year 1938 and 1939 following increased awareness
of the workers and the impact of left radical thought. The
tendency to evade the recommendations of N. Venkata-
ramayya's court of enquiry also to some extent promoted
industrial discontent.

D.N. Strathie, the Commissioner of Labour, in a letter to the Secretary to Government of
Madras on 16 July 1938, observed that "This place is
seething with discontent. There are constant quarrels,
strikes and threats of strikes. I believe that these
are all ultimately due to the inadequacy of the existing
wages and the delay in raising them, and that once the wages' question is decided, things will settle down."

320. Ibid.

321. G.O.No.733, Dev. Dept., 25-3-39, TNA. G.O.No.902,
Dev. Dept., 5-4-39. G.O.No.989, Dev. Dept., 11-4-38
TNA. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for
the first half of Feb. 1939, NMM&L. (a) There was a
strike in two textile mills of Tiruppur over discharge
of 141 workers; (b) There was also a strike in Kalees-
war Mills in March 1939 for reinstatement of 100 doft
boys, payment of allowance for a month to 34 women
transferred as reelers.

322. G.O.No.2792, Dev. Dept., 8-11-38, TNA.

323. G.O.No.2059, Dev. Dept., 23-8-38, TNA.
Another significant development was the consolidation and crystallization of the workers into a class capable of understanding its own interests as being different from those of the capitalist class. Often strikes in one mill came to be supported by the workers in other mills. For instance, in the case of a strike in Saroja Mills in the month of February and March 1938, there was a continuous support of the workers from Lakshmi Mills, Sri Ranga Vilas Mills and Radha Krishna Mills. By 1939, the textile worker in Coimbatore like his counterparts in other textile centres had been able to develop an understanding of the contradictory nature of the capitalist system and was able to articulate his grievances much more forcefully.

The spread of radical ideas brought about a change in the awareness and understanding of the workers of Malabar also. The poor economic conditions, the rapid spread of radical and revolutionary ideas and the changed political atmosphere affected the workers. Strikes of the workers were no longer spontaneous outbursts and unorganised. They were also no longer shortlived. Organised and prolonged strikes came to be launched with the active involvement of the left radical working class leaders.

324. G.O.No.989, Dev. Dept., 11-4-38, TNA.
Workers in four weaving factories in Tellichery came out on strike at the beginning of June 1937 over the question of wages under the leadership of the Congress socialist C.H. Kanaran.\textsuperscript{325} Their main demand was for an increase in wages from one anna per yard to $1\frac{1}{2}$ anna per yard. The determination of the strikers and the public support to their cause forced the employers to agree to a settlement. The strike came to an end on 16 June 1937. It was agreed by the employers to raise the wages of male weavers by $1\frac{1}{2}$ pies per yard of cloth woven and that of the female workers by $\frac{1}{2}$ pie per skein of thread twisted by them.\textsuperscript{326} There were a few strikes over the question of wage increases in the weaving factory in the month of December 1937.\textsuperscript{327}

There was a fairly serious and prolonged strike of workers in the Commonwealth Weaving Factory, Cannanore, involving 706 workers on 23 February 1939. The main demands of the workers included the recognition of the trade union, increase of wages, grant of casual leave with pay and grant of a month's pay annually as bonus.\textsuperscript{328} A settlement was

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{325} G.O.No.448, Dev. Dept., 21-2-38, TNA. \textit{Congress Socialist}, 12 June 1937.
\item \textsuperscript{326} G.O.No.448, Dev. Dept., 21-2-38, TNA.
\item \textsuperscript{327} G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
\item \textsuperscript{328} G.O.No.2109, Dev. Dept., 25-8-39, TNA.
\end{itemize}
affected with government's intervention. The employers agreed to recognise the labour union and to grant sick leave for seven days and casual leave for six days with pay. An increase in wages was however not accepted. The mill was reopened on 24 March 1939.\textsuperscript{329}

To sum up, the working class in textile industry had been able to perceive the underlying contradictory nature of the capitalist system. Also it was able to achieve the understanding that its interests were different from those of the other classes.\textsuperscript{330} The growth of left ideology had sharpened this understanding. It also helped in the consolidation of the workers as a class. The working class was also able to identify through experience in the factory the sources of its exploitation.\textsuperscript{331}

\begin{quote}
329. Ibid.
330. Interviews with:
M. Arjunan, 27-6-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
S. Muthaiah, 9-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
R. Muthusami, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
Chokkar Pillai, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
S.N. Kaliannan, 3-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
R. Kissen, 4-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
Vellapa Reddy, 2-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.

331. Oral interviews with:
S. Muthaiah, 9-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
R. Muthusami, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
Chokkar Pillai, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
M. Veeranan, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
M. Ramamurthi, 8-7-89, Madurai, Tamilnadu.
S.N. Kaliannan, 3-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
R. Kissen, 4-7-89, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.
\end{quote}
Extremely low wages, continuation of the system of temporary employment, lack of retirement benefits and arbitrary dismissal of the workers were some of the common features in the sugar industry in Madras presidency. The employers showed complete disregard for the miserable conditions of the workers in the industry.

As explained elsewhere, the process of intensified politicization and the growth of radical ideas was effectively assisted by the active involvement of the Congress Socialists and Communists.\textsuperscript{332} In fact, working class leadership in the sugar industry was dominated by left radicals. P. Jeevanandam, Ratnam Pillai and R. Jagannathan, who were communists, were important leaders of sugar workers.\textsuperscript{333} As a consequence, sugar workers began to resist capitalist exploitation much more forcefully. Workers of East India Distilleries and Sugar Factory Ltd., Nellikuppam, protested in the month of September 1937 over continuous apathy of the employers to their worsening conditions.\textsuperscript{334} Attempts were made toward the end of 1938 to bring about the first

\textsuperscript{332} G.O.No.1748, Pub. Dept., 30-10-36, TNA.

\textsuperscript{333} G.O.No.1748, Pub. Dept., 30-10-36, TNA. G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.

\textsuperscript{334} G.O.No.2795, Dev. Dept., 15-12-37, TNA.
general strike in four important sugar industrial centres of the presidency. A meeting of the representatives of four labour unions from Nellikuppam, Ranipet, Samalkot and Thuckalay was held on 25 December 1938 and passed resolutions concerning various problems of the working class in sugar industry. 335

The four labour unions served a strike notice to the factory management in the month of February 1939 urging acceptance of their demands of the workers. The Commissioner of Labour after meeting members of workers' federal committee reported to the Congress government that the position of the federal committee was "irregular" and "the demands of the workers relating to the grant of privilege leave, sick leave, sectional holidays, etc., were untimely and not well advised, having regard to the several concessions granted by the company in 1938." 336 Appreciating the view of the Commissioner of Labour, V.V. Giri prevailed upon the federal committee to issue a statement on 28 February 1939 withdrawing the strike notice.

The restiveness of the workers began to grow as nothing happened after the withdrawal of the strike notice.

335. G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.
It was also assumed by the leadership that if strike commenced in one centre workers in other three centres would also go on strike. 337 Leaders were active among the workers preparing them psychologically for the launching of the strike. All the labour unions served strike notice toward the end of March 1939 informing the managements that a strike would begin any day after the first week of April 1939. The Congress government, alarmed by the prospects of general working class unrest in sugar industry, issued a press communique on 6 April 1939 expressing its view that "there is no justification for immediate direct action by the workers". 338 The Congress government also deprecated the tendency of the workers to resort to direct action without fully exhausting the possibility of settlement through negotiation. 339 The strike was started in Nellikuppam, Ranipet and Samalkot on 25 and 26 April 1939.

V.V. Giri appealed to the workers to withdraw the strike. Addressing the Nellikuppam workers just after the beginning of the strike, he said:

337. G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.
338. F.No.G-35/1939, AICC Papers, NMM&L.
339. Ibid.
Government feel that you have not negotiated properly with the management. The Government think that a strike has been precipitated. Government made clear their attitude in their communiqué about the labour situation at Nellikuppam and we feel that you and your union have not followed the spirit and letter of it. We consider that you have not considered the issues in proper spirit. If you rely on Government, follow my advice. Your duty is to cancel this strike and to put up your reasonable demands after deeply considering the various issues. The Government will then help you. 340

But while the Congress government opposed direct action by the workers in unmistakable terms, the local town Congress Committees actively supported the workers in their struggle. Nellikuppam Town Congress Committee considered the demands of the workers as "just and reasonable", and Samalkota Town Congress Committee in its two meetings held on 25 and 28 April 1939 under the presidency of A. Nagabhushana Gupta passed resolutions sympathizing with the strikers and requested the Congress government to intervene in the strike. 341 It also passed a resolution condemning the management for using blacklegs and police action in terrorising and intimidating

340. Ibid.

341. G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.
peaceful picketers through arrests. 342

Picketing was organised at Nellikuppam. While picketing, the volunteers carried Congress flags, red flags and placards like "Down with Capitalism", "Long live Revolution", "Down with Blacklegs". Picketing was also attended with clashes between the strikers and the blacklegs. 343 Prohibitory orders against processions, meetings and picketing were issued by the administration. Despite prohibitory orders, Ratnam Pillai, R. Jagannathan and Sivagnanam marched at the head of a procession of about 200 workers. This resulted in a lathi-charge and the arrest of 47 workers. 344 Interestingly, the Congress government directed the District Magistrates to provide protection to the mills in running them with blacklegs. 345 While Jagannathan was awarded one year's rigorous imprisonment, Ratnam Pillai and 8 others were given two months'
rigorous imprisonment.  

The Congress government very strongly conveyed its disapproval of the strike and its displeasure at continuation of the strike. C. Rajagopalachary issued an appeal on 7 May 1939 aimed at conveying a mild warning and displeasure of the Congress government at the continuation of the workers' fight. The appeal ran thus:

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. I want you to go back to work at once. Any delay makes it more and more difficult for satisfactory reinstatement. Your strike is entirely against governments' advice and in disregard of our appeal. We cannot allow any disorder and disturbance or intimidation of men who wish to work in the factory.

The strong disapproval of the strike, intimidation of the workers as a result of police action, and the arrests of the working class leaders caused rapid decline of the strike movement. Strikes at Nellikuppam and


347. F.No.G-35/1939, AICC Papers. Also G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.

Ranipet were called off following the appeal of C. Raja-
gopalachary. The workers of Samalkot after continuing
their fight with determination for some more time gave
up the fight unconditionally on 29 May 1939.\textsuperscript{349} The
collapse of the workers' struggle left some workers out
of employment, it also increased the victimization of
the workers by the employers. The management of the
Parry's company in their letter of 18 May 1938 clearly
stated that "there are certain workers whom we cannot
possibly engage in any circumstance."\textsuperscript{350}

The anti-communist stand of the Congress government
and disapproval of the workers' militant action forced
the workers to accept failure of their struggle. Despite
the active support of the local Congress Committees and
the public, police repression, intimidation, use of black-
legs by the factory management supported by the Congress
government rapidly brought an end to the determined fight
of the workers. The general strike of the sugar workers
presents a direct contrast to the strike of the textile
workers of Madura and Papanasam in 1938 when the Congress
government took unusual steps to bring success to the

\textsuperscript{349} The Hindu, 9 May 1939. G.O.No.1453, Dev. Dept.,
3-6-39. Erskine Collection, 15, 16, 17. Erskine
to Linlithgow, 22 May 1939, NMM&L.

\textsuperscript{350} G.O.No.1453, Dev.Dept., 3-6-39, TNA.
workers' strike. The reasons for this can be located in the differential approach of the Congress government to strikes led by moderates and leftists.  

C.

As in the case of other industries, the period between 1937 and 1939 marked a significant phase in working class activity in the jute industry. The discontent of the workers in jute mill at Chittivalasa, Vizagapatam district, began to grow as the mill management proposed to lay off 260 workers following direction from the headquarters in Calcutta. It informed the workers in the month of April 1938 about the management's proposed measures. The suggestion of the president of the Chittivalasa Labour Union, K. Subba Rao, that full strength of the mill could be maintained with reduced pay without the retrenchment of 260 workers was not accepted by the mill management. The workers also strongly suspected

351. *Linlithgow Papers*, Vol.67, 1939. From Erskine to Linlithgow, 8 May 1939. Erskine writes to Linlithgow, "...I saw Giri in regard to this matter... he considers that the workers have no case at all. Communist influence is undoubtedly behind this disturbance and it must be said that the ministers are now to some extent losing control of labour. The Premier is coming round to the view that it is time some action was taken against the communist speakers." NMM&L.


353. G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
that the real purpose was to victimize the workers for having collected money for the union fund and for dis- buting pamphlets and leaflets. 354 Workers finally struck work on 27 April 1938. The strike involved nearly 3,200 workers. 355

Regular meetings and processions of the workers were continued. More than 3,000 workers of the mill participated in the processions. Bands of volunteers carried national flags singing patriotic songs in the course of the processions. 356 After the strike had lasted more than two months the Congress government sent the Commissioner of Labour, S.V. Ramamurthi, on 7 July 1938 to investigate the possibility of effecting a settlement of the dispute. 357 On the recommendation of S.V. Ramamurthi, the government decided to appoint a court of enquiry. 358 This led to the workers to suspend the strike on 8 August 1938 and the mill was reopened on that day. 359

354. The Hindu, 3 May 1938.
355. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for the first half of May 1938, NMM&L.
356. The Hindu, 2 June 1938.
357. G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
358. The Hindu, 19 July 1938.
359. G.O.No.86, Dev. Dept., 10-1-39, TNA.
The Collector of Madras was appointed as the court of enquiry. He concluded that though no deliberate victimization of the workers was involved in the retrenchment, such victimization could not be ruled out on the part of the subordinate officers who decided the names of the workers to be retrenched. He suggested among other things that workers should be given 10 days casual leave with pay in a year and 15 days advance notice in case of dismissal. 360

The mill management did not approve of the findings of the court of enquiry. Matters reached a culminating point when the company demoted a worker, Madimi Appanna, on the ground that he was turning out less production. The workers staged a stay-in strike in the factory on 14 February 1939. 361 In order to disperse the workers and clear them out of the mill the police first lathi-charged and then opened fire on the workers on the night of 14 February 1939 in the presence of the District Collector and Magistrate of Vizagapatam. One worker was killed and many others injured.

360. National Front, 19 March 1939, NMM&L. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for the first half of October 1938, NMM&L.

361. The Hindu, 15 Feb. 1939.
The President of the Chittivalasa Labour Union, K. Subba Rao, an M.L.A., observed: "The District Collector came to the Mill at about 12.30. At that time, most of the workers were either asleep or lying down at ease, while the remaining workers were peaceful. Most of the lights inside the Mill were then put out. There was thus firing and a severe lathi-charge inside the Mill.... Among the casualties were one Inti Satteyya who died in the hospital. Another who fell down unconscious, but after several hours, revived in hospital. Altogether there were more than a hundred casualties but in all 76 persons have reported to the union office about injuries, a list of which has been prepared." 362 The unofficial enquiry into the police firing conducted by B.S. Rangasayi put the casualties at one worker dead, 15 workers injured in firing and 86 injured in the lathicharge. 363

The police firing on the workers in Chittivalasa was widely criticized. Protest meetings were also held by the Congress socialists and other workers' organisations in several other parts of Madras presidency. 364

363. Andhra Patrika, 3 April 1939.
Congress government in a press communiqué regretted the tendency of the workers to stage stay-in strikes. It believed that "stay-in-strikes are not strikes at all or any form of collective bargaining, but a dangerous form of violent criminal trespass which must lead to serious damages to property and life and which cannot be tolerated by any government responsible for peace and order, and has to be dealt with by the use of force with fatal and disproportionate results." 365

Though the Congress government disapproved of the methods of stay-in-strikes, it severely criticized the action of the District Magistrate for his incompetent manner of dealing with the situation. C. Rajagopalachary said that "no responsible officer could take the extreme step of opening fire on such a crowd for the purpose of clearing the place without counting a definite warning and making it clear to them of the actual intention to open fire in case they still persisted.... Mr. Crombie, I must hold, committed an act of utter stupidity and betrayed an incompetence which in an officer giving order to an armed force is inexcusable; in ordering the rifle men to load, and shouting thereafter in the midst of din

and confusion "Don't fire".\footnote{366} Mr. Crombie, the District Magistrate, in turn argued that he had only given the order to the police to load and had said "Don't fire".\footnote{367}

The Congress government wanted that Crombie should be transferred from Vizagapatam as a punishment for his incompetence. C. Rajagopalachary observed that "to allow him to continue in the same place as if nothing had happened would be a stultification which is not possible for me to submit to."\footnote{368} But Erskine, the Governor, and Linlithgow, the Viceroy, agreed on the one point that Crombie must not be allowed to be transferred from Vizagapatam as a mark of government's disfavour.\footnote{369}

The Secretary to Government of Madras, T.G. Rutherford, believed that V.V. Giri was mainly responsible for the controversy over Crombie's case. He wrote: "He has, I think, been mainly responsible for all the trouble over

\footnote{366} Erskine Collection, 15, 16, 17. C.R. V.V. Giri observations on 3-4-39, NMM&L.

\footnote{367} Erskine Collection, 15, 16, 17. Crombie, Collector and District Magistrate of Vizagapatam to the Secretary to the Govt. of Madras, 15-2-39, NMM&L.

\footnote{368} Linlithgow Papers, Vol.67. In his correspondence to Linlithgow, Erskine mentions the observation of C. Rajagopalachary, Erskine to Linlithgow, 11 April 1939, NMM&L.

\footnote{369} Erskine Collection, 15,16, 17. Telegram to Viceroy 30 March 1939. Viceroy to Governor of Madras, 31 March 1939, NMM&L.
Erskine, in his correspondence with Linlithgow, observed: "I would add that I have done my best to protect Crombie from unfair treatment on the unfortunate shooting at Chittivalasa.... I have also refused to transfer him to Nellore as a mark of disapproval."  

The mill was closed for several months. The case of rioting against the workers was dropped under the order of the government. The adamant attitude of the British employers, the police repression and the relative apathy of the Congress government contributed to the failure of the Chittivalasa jute workers' determined struggle. The police firing during the strike left an indelible impression on the minds of the workers. Also it is important to note that the strike helped in the consolidation of class solidarity among the workers. The workers interviewed by me narrated the gory tale of the police firing and also referred to the fact that the strike had promoted unity among them.

371. Linlithgow Papers, Vol. 67, Erskine to Linlithgow, 28 April 1939, NMM&L.
373. Oral interviews with:
I. Joga Rao, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
Ch. Appala Narasayya, 9-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
G. Ammanayya, 10-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
T. Ramulu, 10-8-88, Chittivalasa, Andhra Pradesh.
Tobacco workers too launched strike struggles to improve their material conditions during 1937-39. There was an instance of spontaneous stoppage of work by the workers of India Leaf Tobacco Development Company in Chirala, Guntur district, on 27 October 1937 following an accident which resulted in the death of a worker.\(^{374}\) The grievances of the temporary workers were also included to the other demands of the workers.

It was during this strike that M. Yegnanarayana, President of the Taluq Congress Committee, and other lawyers of Bapatla, a nearby town, advised the workers to form themselves into a union. The Employees' Union of the India Leaf Tobacco Development Company was formed and it was registered in the month of January 1938 with M. Yegnanarayana as President.\(^{375}\) The strike was called off when the company agreed that there would be no victimization and ill-treatment of workers. It was also agreed that compensation would be paid as per the Workingmen Compensation Act.\(^{376}\)

\(^{374}\) G.O.No.651, Dev. Dept., 16-3-39, TNA. G.O.No.1064, Dev. Dept., 23-4-38, TNA.

\(^{375}\) G.O.No.448, Dev. Dept., 21-2-38, TNA. G.O.No.514, Dev. Dept., 2-3-38, TNA.

\(^{376}\) G.O.No.448, Dev. Dept., 21-2-38, TNA.
The workers however remained dissatisfied as their demands had not been met. The adamancy of the company management in refusing to recognise the trade union under the Presidentship of M. Yegnanarayana and its hostile attitude towards those workers who were members of the trade union became a potential source of discontentment among the workers. A memorandum submitted by the workers' union on 12 January 1938 to the company management was ignored. By this time the strength of the union had risen to about 1,750.

By the end of the month, the company granted a bounty of 2 annas instead of Rs.1 a week similar in all other respects to the bonus which was stopped from 1930. The company management bypassed the union and conveyed its decision to the workers directly. This was interpreted by the workers as an effort to ignore their trade union. On 7 February, the workers adopted the tactic of deliberate slackness of work as a way of expressing their discontent, and "on 8th (February) practically no work was turned out at all." The company management

377. Ibid. Also Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14; F.R. for the first half of Feb. 1938, NMM&L.
379. The Hindu, 19 April 1938.
380. Ibid.
dismissed two workers for deliberate slackness of work; the dismissals were followed by a sit-down strike by all the workers. The company declared a lock out. 381

The efforts of V.V. Giri to bring about a settlement did not bear fruit; instead the effort only increased the frustration of the strikers. 382 The president of the workers' union asked the workers to remain firm and assured them that the Congress ministry would do everything to help them. 383

On 14 February 1938, the company decided to open the factory with the help of police and blacklegs. The strikers gathered in the front of the company gate and resorted to violent picketing preventing the blacklegs from entering the factory. The number of picketing workers was more than 3,000. The picketers also took recourse to stoning. Intermingling of the police, picketers and blacklegs and their mutual clashes created a scene of complete disorder. The police soon took recourse to beating and chasing of the workers who dispersed in different directions. 384 Police opened fire on a section

381. Ibid.
383. The Hindu, 19 April 1938.
of the workers which left three workers dead and several injured. The police were also injured in the clashes. 385

The police firing was followed by a series of arrests of the workers and by their prosecution. The total number of arrests came to 32, of which 18 were Erukals, tribals employed in the factory. 386

A settlement was affected between the workers and the company management on 14 February 1938. It was agreed that all those employed by the company before 7 February 1938 would be taken back without any reservation and victimization. 387

The police firing on the tobacco workers met with a wave of protests and sympathy from several trade unions and the public. Public meetings, workers meetings and student demonstrations under the auspices of the Congress Committee, the Congress Socialist Party and the trade unions were held in Chirala, and in other towns such as


as Ongole, Bezwada, Bapatala, Guntakal, Masulipatam, Nellimarla, Nellore and Madras. The Andhra Provincial Congress Socialist Party, the Andhra Provincial Student Federation, the Andhra Provincial Youth League and the Andhra Press Workers' Union issued a joint statement calling upon all anti-imperialist organizations to observe 22 February, as "Chirala Day". "Chirala Day" was observed on 22 February 1938 all over Andhra region.

The Andhra Provincial Congress Committee demanded a non-official enquiry committee into the Chirala incident of 14 February 1938. It is however interesting to note that C. Rajagopalachary specifically requested the Governor of Madras "to give us an English I.C.S. judge," for conducting the enquiry. The enquiry committee constituted under justice Horwill reported that "there can be no doubt that all the acts of the police were well controlled.... That the only way to disperse the crowd and hold them in check was to fire.... I am of opinion that the Magistrate and the police exercised reasonable control of the force


at their disposal and could not avoid a recourse to fire arms."

391

The Congress government endorsed the conclusions of Horwill Committee report with the statement that "it is impossible to find any alternative course for the small contingent of police except what was pursued... it cannot be said that firing was excessive. It had, of course, to be such as to impress the mob that the police were serious about it." 392

392

The findings of Justice Horwill disappointed the radical left and the Andhra Provincial Congress Committee. The meeting of the Working Committee of the Andhra Provincial Congress held at Masulipatam on 11 April 1938 felt that the enquiry of Justice Horwill was "unsatisfactory and incomplete". 393 Andhra Congressmen at a conference on 28 April passed a resolution criticising the report and called upon the Congress government to appoint "another independent enquiry committee." 394 Andhra Patrika and Krishna Patrika, leading nationalist newspapers of Andhra, strongly doubted the soundness of the findings of Horwill

391. The Hindu, 19 April 1938.

392. Ibid.

393. The Hindu, 14 April 1938.

394. National Front, 8 May 1938.
The Guntur District Congress Committee too arrived at a conclusion different from the official one. It concluded that "the workers had shown no tendency towards violence. It was the police on the contrary who chased the workers three furlong off the factory, indulged in indiscriminate lathi beating and opened fire on a retreating crowd." Erskine, the Governor of Madras, in his correspondence with Linlithgow in April 1938 wrote as follows about the Horwill report thus: "It is very satisfactory in every way and completely vindicates the action that the authorities were forced to take. In fact, Horwill really puts the whole blame for those unfortunate events upon the organiser of the labour union, who is an 'outsider', being a vakil from a neighbouring town."

The strike of the tobacco workers in Chirala was a culmination of the growing discontent of the workers

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396. National Front, 8 May 1938.

397. Erskine Collection, 11, 12, 13, 14. From Erskine to Linlithgow, 3 April 1938, NMM&L.
over their accumulated grievances. It was also due to the growing awareness of the workers of the importance of the strike as a weapon to wrest concessions from the capitalist class. The Congress government placed as it was in the unpleasant situation of dealing with the militant working class conflict viewed the police firing as a problem of law and order. C. Rajagopalachary, as the Premier, sought to save the Congress government from unpopularity through an official enquiry.

The formation of workers' union, the articulation of interests by the workers through strikes and the tenacity with which the workers fought for their demands all point to the growth of trade union consciousness among the tobacco workers.

E.

While the working class in organised industries was better organised and acquired a high degree of class awareness, workers in smaller trades also began to be influenced by the political and ideological transformation taking place in Madras presidency from 1934 onwards. They were increasingly organised by the local leaders of the National Congress and the left groups and parties.

Thus, the Madras Press Workers' Union, Madras, the Coca-
 nada Press Workers' Union, Cocanada, the Vizagapatam
Harbour and Port Workers' Union, Vizagapatam, the Madras
Toddy Tappers' Union, Madras, Western India Match Factory
Workers' Union, Tiruvottiyur, the Andhra Provincial Palm-
yra Jaggery Industrial Labour Union, Nidadavole, were
registered during the years 1934 and 1939 in the Madras
presidency. \(^{399}\)

There were several examples of unorganized workers' struggle for the improvement of their economic conditions. Beedi workers of Nellore struck work over reduction in their wages in April 1935. \(^{400}\) The Tile Workers of Calicut protested over the question of inadequate wages in the month of September and October 1937. \(^{401}\) The workers of the West Coast Electric Supply Corporation, Cannanore, struck work in July 1937 over inadequate wage rates. \(^{402}\) Workers of Sri Ramachandra Ginning, Shelling and Oil factory in Nandyal struck work over the question of wages and other facilities in November 1937. \(^{403}\)

\[^{399}\] G.O.No.47, Dev. Dept., 6-1-39, TNA.
\[^{400}\] G.O.No.66, PW&LD, 8-1-38, TNA.
\[^{402}\] Congress Socialist, 17 July 1937 & 31 July 1937.
\[^{403}\] The Hindu, 1 Nov. 1937.
of Vizagapatam Harbour and Port Workers' Union were agitated over the question of recognition of their trade union and the threat of possible retrenchment. 404 Hundreds of workers in 12 metal factories of Kalahasti refused to work as in one of the factories wages were reduced in February 1939. 405 350 workers of Sri Ganeshan Aluminium workers struck work on 29 July 1937 over inadequate wages, absence of holidays and leave facilities, and insecurity of service conditions. The immediate pretext was the dismissal of a worker. 406 A conciliation board was appointed and the strike ended with the management agreeing to the recognition of workers' union and a slight increase in the wages of the workers along with certain other concessions. 407

The fibre and salt workers of Cocanada struck work in the beginning of April 1939 over the issue of wages and other inadequate facilities. The earlier recommendations of the Commissioner of Labour, S.V. Ramamurthi, for increase in the wages of all classes of workers were not implemented. 408

408. The Hindu, 1 June 1938.
The callousness of the merchants and their non-implementation of the recommendations of the Commissioner of Labour forced the workers to resort to direct action in the beginning of April 1939 under the leadership of Congress Socialists. As the management resorted to the employment of blacklegs, the workers resorted to intense picketing on 4 April 1939, which led to the police lathi-charge on the picketers.\(^409\) East Godavari District Congress Committee passed a resolution criticizing the police lathi-charge as "inhuman".\(^410\) Processions by the workers were banned by the District Magistrate and the five leaders of the strike, who defied the prohibitory orders, were arrested. The District Magistrate was forced to impose section 144 Cr. P.C. on 12 April on the merchants who attempted to open the godowns without arriving at any settlement with the workers. It was however lifted on 14 April.\(^411\) A settlement was brought about with the intervention of the Commissioner of Labour. The arrested five leaders of the strike who were kept in prison went on


\(^{410}\). The Hindu, 8 April 1939.

\(^{411}\). Erskine Collections, 11, 12, 13, 14. F.R. for the first half of April 1939. National Front, 23 April 1939, NMM&L.
hunger strike on the ground that the Premier's promise to withdraw the pending cases and order the release of the arrested leaders was not fulfilled. The fibre workers and cartmen struck a sympathetic strike on 9 May 1939 and their strike was followed by the sympathetic strike of scavengers on 10 May 1939. The hunger strikers however gave up their strike on the promise of the Premier that the arrested leaders would be released after arbitration. The arrested leaders were released on 25 May 1939.

The struggles of the workers in the small industries were mostly over the question of wages. Most of the strikes were spontaneous and shortlived. In most of the small industries, working class organisations had come up by the end of 1939 with the active involvement of the Congress Socialist, Communist and Congress leaders.

412. Erskine Collection, 15, 16, 17, F.R. for the first half of May 1939, NMM&L.

413. The Hindu, 26 May 1939.