CHAPTER - II
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1930s: A DECADE OF RISING WORKING CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN ASSAM

Consequent to the world economic crisis of 1930s, the general living condition of the Indian working class deteriorated everywhere. The world-wide depression also affected Indian economy: agricultural prices fell down, the wages of the industrial and factory labours were reduced. The workers began to join together for collective bargaining.

DEVELOPMENTS IN 1930s

In Assam, however, the first part of 1930’s was comparatively peaceful. Of course that does not mean there was no problem in the labour front. Labour problem was there but the workers’ movements were mainly confined to the tea gardens and their number were much less than the preceding years. The number of strikes, unlawful assembly and cases of violence were numerous during the preceding decade and only in 1928-29 violence had to be prevented by police in about six cases. Compared to that, inspite of the prevailing political instability in the country, Assam was peaceful. “Unlike the non-cooperation movement of 1921, the political upheaval of the thirties failed to rouse the workers in action. Not that they did not suffer from economic depression. But their resentment took the usual path of sporadic and self contained strikes on economic demands. There was no meeting points between these economic struggles and contemporaneous political movement....... They (the strikers) were all along clearly ebullient, although they had neither a trade union organisation of their own nor any contact with politics outside.”

LEFT IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Meanwhile, Marxist philosophy began to spread among a section of the Assamese intelligentsia and the influence of communism could be found even among the Congressmen in the province. The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang District observed: “It has been obvious for years that the Congress has gradually been becoming more and more a revolutionary organisation, and its leaders more and more sympathetic to communist propaganda”.2

“Samyabadi Samiti”, a socialist organisation, was established at Sylhet in 1931 to enlighten the people on their right over the land. British rule, landlordism, bureaucracy, capitalism and Planter Raj—all came under attack from a group of youth who were inspired by the emerging leftist and socialist ideologies. Dusukanath Goswami, Narendra Nath Choudhury, Aftab Ali, Muhammed Murtaza Gabutaki, Jagannath Bhattacharjee led in spreading leftist ideologies in this province. Some of them even courted arrest several times. Muslim seamen, who returned from various parts of the world to their native villages in Sylhet, brought with them the heroic stories of labour movement in Russia and other places of the world.3

‘Jugantar’, the revolutionary terrorist organisation of Bengal, kept close contact with Sylhet extremists and ‘Tarun Sangha’, a youth organisation in the line of Jugantar, was formed. Tarun Sangha played an important role as the revolutionary youth wing of the congress.4 The Surma Valley Provincial Committee of the All India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936. In the same year strike was organised at Dhubri Match Company

2. Home Political File No.23, Deputy Commissioner, Darrang to Chief Secretary, Assam, 24 February , 1934 (Assam Sect.).
3. Guha, op.cit., pp.184-95
4. Ibid
which was directly influenced by the Labour Party of Bengal. In the All India Kisan Sabha Conference held at Lucknow in 1926, for the first time an Assamese delegate (Jagannath Bhattacharjee) participated. Under the management of the Bengal Labour Party the All Assam Peasants’ Conference was held in Dhubri in the same year.5 Articles on leftist movement began to appear in Assamese periodicals.6 Some of the Cotton College students established the ‘Radical Club’ (the club was outwardly known as the ‘Vyam Samiti’) through which they circulated contraband Bolshevik literature among the students and the people.7 Imbued with socialist and leftist ideologies some congressmen in the state like Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Arun Kumar Chanda, Kedar Nath Goswami advocated the labours’ cause during the period under study. But one noticeable feature was that in spite of their efforts, the Congress as an organisation failed to take initiative and leadership in these struggles or to provide effective guideline to the workers till mid-thirties. The Pradesh Congress Committee never sincerely tried to enlist the workers in its cadre except in some rare cases. Earlier in 1922 there was an attempt on the part of the Congress to enrol the tea-garden workers as Congress volunteers. After that only in 1939 a serious attempt was made by Kedarnath Goswami to enlist the workers at Dibrugarh district as Congress members. Though there was absence of a guiding force, the labourers in some occasions were deeply impressed by the national movement and this gave an excellent opportunity to Congress to organise these workers under its banner, which the Congress leadership, failed to understand.

It was only during 1938-39 socialist impact could be seen on the plans and programmes of the Pradesh Congress Committee. The socialist and the leftist also

5. Home Political File No. 18/11/36, Second Half, November, 1936 (FR)  
7. Guha, op.cit.
influenced a section of the students who organised a series of meetings in the state during 1936-37 supporting the workers who fought for redress of their grievances in plantation and oil industries. During this period the socialists and the communists joined together under the banner of Congress (in 1938) and was successful in “probing grievances both among industrial labour in the oil fields, collieries and tea gardens of the province.” The visits of eminent congress and socialist leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, M.N. Roy, Jalaluddin Hashmey, A. Parcell, Hallsworth, Chowka Singh, Dinkar Mehta and Sudhindra Pramanik gave an added impetus to the working class struggle in the province.

It was during the second half of the thirties that the non-plantation industrial labourers of the province came into the forefront of the labour movement in Assam. Industrial workers, under limited political patronisation and intervention, organised themselves strongly during the period and strike followed in two most important and organised industrial concerns of the State - the Assam Match Company, Dhubri and the Assam Oil Company, Digboi, which we shall discuss in details as case studies in the following chapters. These two strikes were very important because these were the pioneering efforts of organised trade union movement in the province.

The period 1936-39 was also a turning point in the history of labour movement of the province. The period saw a wave of strikes in the plantation, oil, match and other small industries as well as among the other wage-earning population of the state. These movements were clearly anti-imperialist in character and had a broad left-nationalist orientation.

8. Assam Administrative Report for the year 1938-39, Government of Assam (Shillong, 1940), See Political Summary.
As an offshoot of the AMCO Workers’ Strike in Dhubri, attempts were made to cause a strike among the employees of the Steamer Company, Dhubri who wanted to go on strike “in sympathy with similar strikes elsewhere”. The Jute-testing and sorting employees of Dhubri started work-to-rule and compelled the employers to raise their wage. The Government admitted that ‘it was largely owing to the support given by the Match Factory employees that the Jute-testing labourers of the Marwaris at Dhubri recently had their wages raised’. The Dhubri strike generated tremendous repercussions and the working population particularly the daily wage-earners of the locality became conscious about their rights. Even the cartmen and the rickshaw pullers were not lagging behind. They resorted one-day token strike in sympathy to the AMCO workers in August, 1936. They also participated in a meeting at Local Idgah maidan in the evening where they distributed pamphlets. A strike of the cartmen employed in carrying bales of jutes to the railway station or the river ghat took place in Gauripur town, five miles from Dhubri in 1937 who demanded an increase of their pay. When the Marwari merchants engaged a lorry for transportation, that was damaged and the driver was assaulted, which led to the arrest of six persons. However, within a few days the strikers mutually settled the issue. These developments were quite new in the district - the labour was taught to exert their rights by the Match Factory workers.

About sixty workers of the Commercial Carrying Company, Shillong went on strike on and from September 1, 1937 protesting against the termination of services of five employees of the said Company. The employees demanded immediate

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12. A leaflet circulated by the rickshaw pullers of Dhubri supporting the Match Factory strikers, written in Bengali, in possession of Bepin Chandra Chakravarty, the leader of AMCO strike.
13. Home Political File (FR), No.18/10/37, Second Half, October, 1937.
reinstatement of the sacked workers and stopped all works for about a fortnight.\textsuperscript{14}

The Municipal workers of Shillong went on a strike in the following year, which was widely sympathised by the local students.\textsuperscript{15}

**ASSAM RAILWAY AND TRADING COMPANY WORKERS' STRIKE (1938-39)**

The workers of the “Assam Railway and Trading Company” very successfully concluded a strike in 1938-39. A number of Congressmen in the state, who had sympathies for socialist and communist ideologies like Benoybhusan Chakravarty, Kedarnath Goswami and Nilamani Barthakur, organised the workers.\textsuperscript{16}

The Dibrugarh District Congress Committee under the Presidentship of Kedarnath Goswami, was trying to gain control over labour in the district. The Committee held a series of meetings throughout the district and emphasised that the European capitalists were the main enemies of the workers and demanded redress and reinstatement of victimised workers in different places.\textsuperscript{17} The Congress Committee began to enrol the labourers as Congress workers and practically almost all the coal transhipment workers of Dibrugarh Steamer Ghat became Congress members.\textsuperscript{18} It was due to this fact that the total number of congress membership increased by nearly 140 percent in 1938 compared to the proceeding year.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Asamiya (Assamese weekly), Guwahati, 18 September, 1937, p 10
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Guha, op. cit., p.245.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Guha, op. cit., pp.241-42; Bhuyan, op.cit., pp.46-48.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid, Ananda Bazar Patrika, October-November issue, 1933
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ananda Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, 14 November , 1933.
\end{itemize}
The Management of Assam Railways and Trading Company apprehended trouble due to all these developments. They apprehended that the activities of the Congress might lead to serious labour unrest and therefore decided to nip the move in the bud. The management discharged many labourers from service in the first week of November, 1938 on the ground that “due to erosion of the Brahmaputra the site for stacking coal extracted from the mines of Assam Railway and Trading Company was washed away and so there was surplus labour in the Company.” But curiously enough, the vacancies thus created, were filled up immediately by the contractors’ labour.

Kedarnath Goswami took up the issue very seriously and began to mobilise public opinion in favour of the workers and he succeeded considerably. Before a big audience in a public meeting at Dibrugarh he gave a call for the public boycott of the Dibru-Sadiya Railways unless the discharged labourers were taken back by the management. Under the guidance of Goswami and Benoybhusan Chakravarty the citizens of Dibrugarh and adjoining locality formed the Dibru-Sadiya Railway Boycott Committee. The public of the locality resorted to picketing and boycotted the Railway, expressing their sympathies with the striking workers.

Goswami now extended his influence to the contractors’ workers who were engaged by the management for transhipment work and mutually succeeded in convincing the labourers about the injustice done by the Company towards the

20. Home Political File (FR), No.18/11/38, First Half, November, 1938; Assam Administrative Report for the year 1938-39, Government of Assam (Shillong, 1940), See Political Summary.
21. Ibid.
22. Chandra Prasad Saikia, ed., Radhanath Chankakaty, Guwahati, 1977, pp.39-40, see article by Heramba Bardoloi; Also, Bhuyan, ed. op.cit.
dismissed labourers. The contractors' labourers also now refused to work under the Company and consequently 133 of them (i.e. contractors labourers) were dismissed from service by the management. This was a striking example of working class solidarity.

At this stage the Government intervened. Talks were carried on simultaneously with the workers and the management but no settlement could be arrived at. Meanwhile, boycott of the Dibru-Sadiya Railways, picketing at Dibrugarh station and fund collection drive in support of the striking workers continued simultaneously with the strike. Some local newspaper and some papers from Calcutta, namely Asamiya, Amrita Bazar Patrika etc. stood in favour of the workers’ cause.

Due to public pressure and the Government intervention, the company agreed to reinstate the transhipment workers (i.e., its direct recruits) but declared that in no case the contractors' workers would be taken back. Meanwhile, the police prohibited processions in the locality and some other restrictions were imposed. Mr. Goswami and fourteen other labour leaders were arrested by the police. On more than one occasion the police resorted to lathi charge on the picketers.

In fact things were turning for the worse. At this stage Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam exerted his influence on the Company management to come to terms with the workers. The management realised that the continuation of the strike

27. Home Political File (FR), No.18/11/38, Second Half, November, 1938
29. Ibid.
30. Home Political File (FR), No.18/3/38, Second Half, March, 1939
and the boycott would damage the Company and it would incur a huge financial loss. Accordingly, all the workers, including the contractors' labour were called back to work by the management on 22 December, 1938.\(^{31}\)

This was undoubtedly a triumph of the workers who now got themselves unionised (the union was registered on 29 March, 1939).\(^{32}\) The success of the strike inspired a spirit of confidence among the workers and "this strength of the congress and the labour in the district appeared to have greatly frightened the European planting community" which apprehended trouble in future in tea garden area also.\(^{33}\)

During the period 1938-48, a number of Trade Unions came into existence in the province which clearly showed that the movement was gaining momentum. "There seems of late to have set in a regular craze throughout the province of setting up labour unions of various kinds" reports the Commissioner of Assam to the Home Secretary, Government of India in March, 1939.\(^{34}\) To mention some of the non-plantation trade unions which came into existence during the period are the Shillong Driver and Mechanics' Association, the Assam Government Press Employees Union, Shillong Municipal Board Workers' Union and the Assam Provincial Shop Employees Association. Due to a number of reasons these unions could not achieve anything significant, yet the tendency (of forming and joining together under the banner of unions) itself was a clear indication of the emerging trade union consciousness of the workers and their faith in collective bargaining.\(^{35}\)

31. Home Political File (FR), No. 18/12/38, Second Half, December, 1938.
34. Home Political File (FR), No. 18/3/39, First Half, March, 1939
Table 2.1
NUMBER OF REGISTERED TRADE UNIONS IN ASSAM (TILL 1940)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1937-38</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938-39</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-40</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source:  
(a) A.S. Mathur and J.S. Mathur, *Trade Union Movement in India*, pp.36, 283-84;  
(b) Home Political Files (FR), 1937-40, NAI;  

Table 2.2
LIST OF REGISTERED TRADE UNIONS IN ASSAM (1938-1939)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Union</th>
<th>Head Quarter</th>
<th>Date of Registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Assam Oil Company Labour Union</td>
<td>Digboi</td>
<td>7 August, 1938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Shillong Drivers’ and Mechanics Association</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>5 December, 1938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Assam Railway and Company Labour Union</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>29 March, 1939</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source:  
(a) A.S. Mathur and J.S. Mathur, *Trade Union Movement in India*. pp.36, 283-84;  
(b) Home Political Files (FR), 1937-40, NAI;  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Union</th>
<th>Head Quarters</th>
<th>Date of Registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rajmai Tea Co.</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>27 April, 1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Upper Assam Tea Co.</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>27 April, 1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sylhet Cachar</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cha-Bagan Mazdoor Union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Surma Valley(Shillong)</td>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>6th May, 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Workers' Union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Greenwood Tea Co.</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>6th May, 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mahua (Assam) Tea Co.</td>
<td>Margherita</td>
<td>30th May, 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Assam Govt. Press Industrial Assam.</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>7th August, 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Shillong Municipal</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>10th August, 1939</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:**
(a) A.S. Mathur and J.S. Mathur, *Trade Union Movement in India*, pp. 36, 283-84;
(b) *Home Political Files (FR), 1937-40, NAI*;

**ASSAM MATCH COMPANY WORKERS' STRIKE**

Assam Match Company, whose workers went on strike earlier in 1928, again resorted to strike in 1936. From its nature and magnitude this strike had immense significance. In fact, before the AOC strike of 1939 this was the most organised labour movement in the state which attracted national attention. Therefore, we would examine this strike as a case study:
Assam Match Company: The Organisation

Assam Match Company (AMCO), a subsidiary of the Western India Match Company and a Swedish venture, was established in 1925 at Dhubri, the head quarter town of Goalpara district in Assam.

Before the first World War, demand for match in Indian market was met by imports from mainly Japan and Sweden. During and immediately after the War, import of matches from Sweden increased considerably. As India had a good market for matches, the Swedish match Co., a pioneer match manufacturing company of the world, established match manufacturing factories at Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Bairelly and Dhubri between 1923 and 1929. While all the factories (except Dhubri) became the part of Western India Match Co. Ltd., the Dhubri factory was commissioned as Assam Match Co. in 1925 with an issued capital of £28,000.36

Labour

When the factory was established in 1925, the total manpower employed in the factory was about 500. Most of these workers were unskilled. In the district of Goalpara there were relatively few landless cultivators and the people were strongly attached to their lands. It was on that account that recruitment of labour for the Dhubri factory posed a problem to the company. The unskilled labourers who constituted the majority of the total man power employed, had to be collected from interior villages in lieu of 'Dadan' (a sort of cash award for joining the factory).37

36. "Live and let live.....WIMCO and AMCO in India" - a publicity booklet published by WIMCO Limited
37 My interview with Sri Bepin Chandra Chakravorty”, the veteran trade union activist of Bengal and leader of Match Factory Strike. He edited a weekly newspaper ‘Gana-Chabuk’ from Dhubri.
The match industry required three classes of labour: skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled. While the unskilled labour were collected locally, the semi-skilled labour had to be brought from Bihar and Bengal. Persons included in this category were fitters, cleaners, stakers etc. Skilled workers included draughtsman, electrician etc. and they were entirely recruited from outside. A look at the rolls of the semi-skilled and skilled workers of the factory shows that most of these workers came from Bihar and Bengal.38

THE WORKERS' STRUGGLE

The company was making large profits and paid high dividends to its share holders; but the wages it paid to the labourers was low. Not only that, wage reduction became a regular feature of the company.39 The ordinary unskilled labourers who used to draw Rs.2/- and anna 6 and paisa 2 per week in 1925 was getting less than Rs. 2/- per week in 1928 (See Table 2.4). The workers had a seven-day week, they did not receive any compensation for accidents nor were they entitled to any extra pay for over-time work. The workers of the factory once went on strike in 1928 for about a week but they were compelled to resume their duties unconditionally (discussed in Chapter 1). Though the production of the company was increasing, retrenchment went on unrestrained (see Table 2.5 and 2.6).

In 1934-35, when AMCO's sister concern WIMCO, Calcutta was shifted from Narikeldanga to Dakshineshwar, some of its skilled workers were transferred from Calcutta to Dhubri factory. Bengal was then full of trade union activities and these workers who came from Calcutta to Dhubri had faith in the ideologies of the

38. Official documents and papers at AMCO, Dhubri (Some documents were consulted after securing due permission from AMCO management in 1980-81)
39 Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence (Goalpara), Assam, No 106, Feb. 1936
### Table 2.4

WAGES OF ORDINARY UNSKILLED WORKERS OF ASSAM MATCH COMPANY, DHUBRI (1925-1928)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Wages per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Rs. 2 Anna 6 and Paisa 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Rs. 2 Anna 6 and Paisa 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Rs. 2 Anna 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Rs. 1 Anna 15 and Paisa 2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:**
(a) Weekly pay statement of AMCO and some old records in AMCO (in Personnel Managers office).
(b) Records kept with Sri Bepin Chandra Chakravarty.

### Table 2.5

MAN-POWER (UNSKILLED WORKERS, SEMI-SKILLED WORKERS AND SKILLED WORKERS) EMPLOYED IN ASSAM MATCH COMPANY, DHUBRI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of men-employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>520*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>525</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In 1926, the construction work of the factory was still going on and some construction workers have been shown as semi-skilled workers.

**Source:** AMCO Papers.
of the Bengal Labour Party. These workers took note of the labour dissatisfaction at AMCO and they sent some active workers of AMCO (namely Munir Mian, Salem Khan etc.) to Calcutta to carry on negotiation with the Bengal Labour Party. In its executive meeting in December 1935 at Calcutta, the Bengal Labour Party decided to utilise this opportunity to mobilise trade union movement in Assam where there was no trade union activities so long. They felt, quite correctly, that the situation in Assam was fertile for the leftists to emerge on the scene. It decided to send one of its Asst. Secretaries, Bipin Chakravarty, a veteran trade unionist and an active member of All India Labour Association, to organise the workers of Assam Match Factory, Dhubri.40

Table 2.6

PRODUCTION STATEMENT OF ASSAM MATCH COMPANY (1926-1940)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cases of 40</th>
<th>Cases of 50</th>
<th>Cases of 60</th>
<th>Cases of 80</th>
<th>Total cases (unconverted 50's)</th>
<th>Total cases (converted 50's)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>674</td>
<td></td>
<td>674</td>
<td></td>
<td>808.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>5382</td>
<td></td>
<td>5382</td>
<td></td>
<td>6454.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>18942</td>
<td></td>
<td>10942</td>
<td></td>
<td>13180.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>13482</td>
<td>1391</td>
<td>14873</td>
<td></td>
<td>18403.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>10593</td>
<td>7129</td>
<td>17522</td>
<td></td>
<td>23878.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>4285</td>
<td>11168</td>
<td>15453</td>
<td></td>
<td>23010.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>4132</td>
<td>9054</td>
<td>13186</td>
<td></td>
<td>19444.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td></td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>8795</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>9543</td>
<td></td>
<td>7933.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>11268.8</td>
<td>1040.3</td>
<td>12309.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>10263.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td></td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>3733</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>3847</td>
<td></td>
<td>3114.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>15254</td>
<td>1037</td>
<td>16291</td>
<td></td>
<td>13447.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>17220.4</td>
<td>905.7</td>
<td>18126.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>14863.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>18025.8</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>1204.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>21330.6</td>
<td>17966.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from different AMCO Papers.

40. Ibid. Also confirmed by Bepin Ch. Chakravarty.
Immediately after his arrival, Chakravarty held a series of meetings with the workers where certain demands of the workers were discussed and formulated.41 One of his immediate tasks was the formation of a trade union of the workers of the factory. He persuaded the labourers to combine together and within a short time formed the Bengal-Assam Match Factory Worker's Union in December, 1935 and applied for its registration to the Registrar of Trade Unions, Shillong, Assam under the Trade Union Act, 1926. But recognition was not granted on the ground of some technical objections (as the proposed union was composed employees of match companies covering two states). Though the union failed to get registration, it carried on activities in full swing.

In the meantime the grievances of the workers reached its peak. Along with retrenchment which was going on unrestrained, the company decided to implement from January 1936 a severe wage-cut on the ground that wages paid to AMCO were higher than those in force in similar factories in other parts of India (see Table 2.7 and 2.8).42 The workers who came to Dhubri from distant places like Muzaffarpur, Calcutta and elsewhere were assured free quarters at the time of their appointment which they were not provided with. The workers had neither any security of life, nor insurance against accidents nor any prospect of further improvement.

The union formulated an eighteen-point charter of demands which included no wage cut, weekly holiday for the workers, dearness allowance, increase of pay of all categories of workers, security of service and recognition of the union. They carried on negotiation with the company but failed to secure any concession.

41 Home Political File No.18/1/36, Second Half, January, 1936.
42. Ibid.
### Table 2.7

**LABOUR WAGE IN ASSAM MATCH COMPANY IN 1935**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY OF LABOURERS</th>
<th>WAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ordinary labour</td>
<td>9 ½ Anna per day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Unskilled labour)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Semi-skilled labour</td>
<td>Rs.30/- to Rs.36/- per month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Skilled labour</td>
<td>Rs.45/- to Rs.100/- per month.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:**
(a) AMCO Papers  
(b) Records in possession with Bepin Chandra Chakravarty.

### Table 2.8

**PROPOSED REVISED LABOUR WAGE IN ASSAM MATCH COMPANY**

(scheduled to be effective from 6 January 1936), Dhubri.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Labour</th>
<th>Proposed new wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ordinary casual labour</td>
<td>8 annas per day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(unskilled labour)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Semi-skilled labour</td>
<td>Rs. 26/- to Rs. 30/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*Fitters, cleaners, machine-men, stakers etc.)</td>
<td>per month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Skilled labour</td>
<td>Rs. 45/- to Rs. 100/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*Draughtsman, Electrician etc.)</td>
<td>per month.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:**
(a) Records in possession of Sri Bepin Chandra Chakravarty.  
(b) AMCO Papers.
The union then decided to go on a strike against the “company’s zooloom.”43 After about a month’s preparation, the union finally decided to go on a strike “until and unless the demands of the union are met.”44 It was also decided that the workers would strike their work from the morning of 6 January, 1936, the date from which the employers have decided to reduce the rates of wages.45 Accordingly, nearly 400 workers of the factory went on a strike from the morning of 6 January. The strikers comprised of all section of workers including sanitary and security staff. The supervisory staff, who did not join the strike in the beginning, joined it from the sixth day.46 Only a few of the clerical staff took side with the management.

The strike continued for about eight weeks and was total. The production of the factory came to a standstill. The management initially tried to threaten the workers with the possibility of terminating of their services and tried to recruit labour from the neighbouring areas.47 Chakravarty and a band of active striking employees of the factory physically prevented the new recruits from joining and thus thwarted the company’s attempt to resume production with the help of new recruits.48 They also sent their representatives to Calcutta with copies of printed appeals to attract the sympathy of the workers of their sister concern, WIMCO, Calcutta. The appeal read: “We can never come out successful unless we join hands and show an united front...... we appeal to you for joining us in our attempt ...... come forward, let us all fight

43. Ibid. The Union had the following office bearers: President - Md. Abdur Rahman; Secretary - Banbhasa Sheikh; Assist. Secretary - Md Abdul Zalil Khandakar; Vice President- Hanif Khan; and Treasurer - Deokumar Raut.
44. A copy of the strike resolution taken in the union’s meeting on 28.12.35, in possession of Bepin Chandra Chakravarty.
45. Home Political File (FR) No.18/1/36, First Half, January, 1936 Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, 14 Jan, 1936, p.8
46. Ibid
47. Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence, Goalpara, File No.148, 28 1 36
48. Ibid
The strike led to stoppage of production for more than two months and naturally the company faced a severe crisis. This compelled the management to come to terms. The management invited the union executives who responded to the call. The union chalked out a list of issues to be discussed as well as the basic demands on which emphasis were to be laid. The meeting took place in end-February 1936 and a bi-partite agreement was reached at. The management was represented by Thorstonson, the joint-Director of AMCO while the union was represented by Bepin Chandra Chakravarty, Abdur Rehman and Md. Banbhasa Shiekh. The main terms for settlement which the union leaders placed before the management consisted inter-alia, (i) re-introduction of the rate of wages paid under Mr. Gumming*; (ii) No victimisation of striking employees; (iii) Re-instatement of all employees to their respective posts held at the time of the strike; (iv) recognition of the union etc.50

After two days of discussions, the management conceded to all the demands of the workers except the one on no-victimisation for participating in the strike. The management agreed to reinstate all the workers except the Darwan staff. The management argued that the Darwan staff was responsible for the security of the factory and their duty was similar to those of the police; hence their participation in the strike was a serious breach of discipline and it could not be excused. The union leaders also remained unbending to their demands. However, ultimately it was decided that all the Darwan staff would also be taken back except the Head Darwan who was to be transferred to Ambarnath factory.51

* The ex-manager of the factory.
50. Minutes of discussion between the management and the union found in the records of AMCO and also in the possession of Bepin Chandra Chakravarty.
51. Ibid.
This was the first recorded triumph of trade union movement in Assam. The workers were emboldened for future action due to the success of the strike of course, they had reasons to be jubilant. They succeeded to retain their old pay (which was nearly twenty per cent more from the proposed revised pay (see Tables 2.7 and 2.8). The pay of the AMCO workers were already low and even the Government reports admitted that “the wages of the labourers in the match factory decreased to such an extent that it ceased to be a living wage.” Had the wages been reduced further, the workers would have had a hard hit.

Mr. Chakravarty now became a person of great concern to the AMCO management, local police and the Government. The police now kept close watch on his activities and movements and at one time was at the point of exterminating from Assam. “Were his presence in Dhubri prevented, a great deal of stamina of the local labour party would disappear,” reported Dhubri Police to the Home Secretary. The Superintendent of Police of the Goalpara district opined that through Bepin Chandra Chakravarty “Communist influences are working under the cloak of Bengal Labour Party.” Mr. Chakravarty organised for the first time in Assam, a huge May-Day rally at Dhubri Idgah field in 1936. The commission reported to the Home Secretary: “In Dhubri the employees of the local match factory ....... took an active interest in the (May-Day) celebrations. Their spokesman was a member of Calcutta Labour Party. According to him, May-Day was a protest against merry making of the rich.” In the last week of July, 1936 a Labour Conference was held at Dhubri which was addressed by some Calcutta trade unionists including Sisir Roy and the secretary of the WIMCO.

52. Home Political File (Special Branch), No.E 2(17) 36, D.O. No.481C, Godfrey to Gunning 26 Nov.1936, Assam Secretariat, Political Dept.
53. Ibid
54. Ibid ;also Bhuyan, A.C. ,ed., Political History of Assam, Vol II (Govt. of Assam, Gau.), 1979, p.262.
Labour Union. The speakers emphasized that whatever improvement had been made in regard to the working condition of the workers, had been done primarily for the employees of the capitalists employers. The labourers and the peasants who assembled there were advised to organise themselves and form trade unions and affiliate themselves to the central organisations so that their grievances could be redressed. The conference was used as a platform for propagating leftist ideologies. "They were also persuaded to adopt Soviet Government as their model and to render no help in case of imperialistic war." In short, leftist ideology was being crystallised and labour movement was gaining momentum in the small township of Dhubri.

AMCO WORKERS STRIKE OF 1936

In June 1936, the workers of the Western India Match Company, Ambarnath (a sister concern of AMCO) resorted to strike. Their colleagues in the Dhubri counterpart expressed their solidarity with the striking workers and extended whole-hearted support and even declared their willingness to go on a sympathetic strike in support of the Ambarnath factory workers if demands of those workers were not fulfilled.

Meanwhile, the Dhubri workers, emboldened by their triumph in the January strike, began to intervene in the affairs of the management. They began to interfere in the distribution of work (which was actually the work of the Supervisor); they refused to accept and count coins while receiving the wages (the payment of the wages to the workers were done weekly and small coins were mostly used for payment

56. Home Political File (FR), File No. 18/8/36, First Half, August, 1936, also Interview with Bepin Chandra Chakravarty.
57. Ibid
58. Home Political File (Spl. Branch), File No. 17; Quart. review of Intelligence Report, 1936.
which the union directed its members not to accept); they started objecting to the appointment of some contractors by the management and so on. But things turned for the worse when five workers of AMCO were dismissed from service in November, 1936. The management declared that the workers were sacked on account of their high handed activities while the workers contended that they were sacked due to their involvement in trade union activities. When the dismissals were communicated to the workers, they came out of the factory in a body. This dismissal of five workers was the immediate cause of the strike that followed. The strike started on 14 December, 1936.

Unlike the earlier strike, when the company conceded to most of the demands of the workers, this time the management was very much adamant. While the workers were pressing for the fulfilment of their demands which included reinstatement of all the retrenched employees, punishment of some of the clerical and supervisory staff (who were alleged to have ill-treated the workers) and implementation of the agreement reached between the management after the January strike etc., the management refused to respond and declared a lock-out in the factory which continued till the end of April, 1937.

The strike was peaceful till March, 1937 but later the workers became violent. A number of cases of assault took place since mid-March and in one case Moni Kanta Das, the store-keeper of the factory (who took side with the management) was

60 AMCO Papers: AMCO Manager’s Correspondence with the Directors
61. Bepin Chandra Chakravarty also admits the facts and comments: “Some workers became over-active after the success of January strike.”
62 Assam Administrative Report for the year 1937-38, Shillong, 1939, p 183
seriously beaten up near the Dhubri Railway Station yard. Das was related to the local Directors of the company (Raibahadur Biraj Mohan Dutta and Apurba Kumar Ghosh) who approached the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police, Goalpara, for punishment of the guilty persons connected with these violent incidents and “to suppress this kind of militant movement.” The police now moved into action. A number of workers were arrested and three of them were given six months’ rigorous imprisonment on the ground of “being members of illegal union” and for physically assaulting one Mr. Das who did not join the strike.

A non-Congress coalition ministry headed by Md. Sadullah came to power in Assam in 1937. The Government adopted a novel method to deal with the strikers. Eighteen of the Union activists were made special constables and the Secretary of the labour union was made Sub-Inspector under the Dhubri Police Thana jurisdiction and they were entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining peace in the area. This was a punitive measure and they were specifically instructed that in case of any violent incident taking place in which the labour of Dhubri Match Factory would be involved, they would be held responsible.

The company now took advantage of the scarce caused by the punitive measures taken by the police. It now started bringing labourers from its Bairelly and Calcutta factories and arranged their accommodation within the factory campus under strong police guard. In April the management served notice on those striking employees

63 Ibid; also interview with late Apurba Kumar Ghosh, the leading lawyer and respected citizen of Dhubri. He was a Local Director of AMCO. A copy of the representation’s memorandum found in the collection of Ghosh in his personal library at Dhubri
64 Asamiya Gauhati (Assamese weekly paper, ed. Harendra Nath Baruah) 18 Aug., 1937
65 Home Political File (FR), No. 18/7/37, Second Half, July, 1937, also Guha, op. cit. and Asamiya, 18 Sept., 1937.
who were on monthly wage that their services would be terminated, from the first of May as the factory would continue to remain closed for an indefinite period.\textsuperscript{66} The company, however, was definitely trying to resume production with the help of the workers brought from other factories. Efforts were also made to recruit unskilled labourers from the neighbouring areas (like Gauripur, Golakganj, Panchmyle etc.) but this led to tension and the striking workers began to prevent physically the entry of the villagers in the town area.\textsuperscript{67}

Things were turning from bad to worse. The vested circle tried to foment disturbance and discontent. A section of the clerical and supervisory staff who did not participate in the strike started fomenting communal and racial feelings. They were perhaps backed by the management. Without any visible proof, the Commissioner reported to the Government in December 1936 that "...... one of the aims of the Calcutta agitators, who are largely at the bottom of the trouble, is to capture the Assam match market for the Mohammedan match manufacturers of Calcutta." Some handbills and pamphlets started appearing in the town and the neighbouring areas which pointed out that "if the strikers succeed in forcing the company to come to terms, most of the labourers will again be 'foreigners' and the local labourers of Assam villages will lose their jobs."\textsuperscript{68}

Meanwhile, Chakravarty started a fast unto death from 25 July protesting against the adamant attitude of the company, repression on the strikers and inaction of the Government to settle the issue.\textsuperscript{69} "He (Chakravarty) has been taking water and salt

\textsuperscript{66} Home Political File (FR), No.18/4/37, First Half, April, 1937.
\textsuperscript{67} Interview with Bepin Chandra Chakravarty; also Assam Administrative report for the year 1937-38, Shillong, 1938.
\textsuperscript{68} Home Political File (FR), No.18/4/37, First Half, April, 1937.
\textsuperscript{69} Home Political File (FR), No.18/8/37, First Half, August, 1937; also Amrita Bazar Patrika, 2 August, 1937
and nothing else and is under supervision of a local doctor. He has become very weak. Mr. Chakravarty says that he will not break his fast unless an honourable settlement is arrived at’, reports Amrita Bazar Patrika. Chakravarty, however, gave up his fasting on the eleventh day, i.e., 4 August on being assured by the important Congress leaders of the state (Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Siddhinath Sarmah, Bishnu Ram Medhi etc.) that the issue of AMCO-strike would be taken up at the forth-coming session of the Assam Assembly.

Popular support towards the striking workers was increasing gradually throughout Assam. A public meeting was held at Curzon Hall, Gauhati on 9 July (under the Presidentship of Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed) at the initiative of local Congress leaders and important citizens to focus their attention on the issue. The meeting was addressed, among others by Bishnu Ram Medhi (President, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee), Siddhinath Sarmah (Secretary, APCC), Tarun Ram Phukan, Ambikagiri Roychowdhury, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed - all important Congress leaders of the Province. They condemned the AMCO management for a prolonged lock-out and requested the Government to take steps for an early solution of the issue. The meeting also condemned the appointment of the office bearers of the workers’ union as special constables. It further urged the members of the Assam Legislative Assembly to take steps for electing a non-official committee with a view to enquire into the causes of the strike and trying to bring about reasonable settlement between the authorities and the labourers. This was followed by a visit of Mr.

70. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 4 August, 1937.
71. Ibid. 5 Aug, 1937. According to Chakravarty the hunger strike was withdrawn after receiving a telegram from Jawaharlal Nehru who requested Chakravarty to give up fasting as the matter was taken up by the Congress. Later, Congress gave a call for boycotting AMCO and WIMCO which were the products of Swedish Company.
72. Ibid, 4 July, 1937; also Asamiya, 17 July, 1937.
Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed at Dhubri. A huge meeting was held at the local Gauripur field was addressed by Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Md. Zahanuddin Ahmed (Muslim League MLA) and Md. Abdul Hamid Khan - the Maulana of Bhasani (the famous Muslim League leader and MLA) and all of them strongly spoke in favour of the strikers and gave assurance that the matter would be raised in the floor of the Legislative Assembly. A number of other meetings were also held in Dhubri and other places of eastern India like Narikeldanga, Sylhet, Gauhati, Gauripur etc. which were addressed among others by Maulavi Mazid Ziosahams, ex-MLC, Dakshina Ranjan Gupta, K.L.C, Durgamohan Guha and others.  

The Sadulla Ministry came under severe criticism due to its failure to bring about a solution of the strike. Along with the public, local press also became critical about the labour policy of the Sadulla Government. **Asamiya** wrote: “For the last five months, nearly 400 workers of the Dhubri Match Factory of our Assam are on strike on the ground of repression by the management - is this fact known to the Assam Premier, Sir Sadulla Saheb? If the answer is positive, what has he done for bringing about a settlement of the issue? Or is he too busy to save his Ministry? ...... Unlike other provinces, Assam does not have any powerful trade union. Though an organisation named Assam Labour Union was formed, the Government has become suspicious of its role from the very beginning. The Assamese people and the leaders are callous towards the serious labour problem in Assam. Will the leaders and the Councillors of Assam be kind enough to keep their eyes open on these problems?”

Meanwhile, the management lifted the lock-out in April and tried to restore

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74. Asamiya, (see editorial column), 15 May, 1937, p. 5 (Translated).
skeleton service in the factory with the help of the semi-skilled labourers which it brought from outside but failed.

In the meantime, the message of Swadeshi began to spread among the workers. They made a fervent appeal to the people to boycott Swedish matches unless the company settled the issue with the union. In fact some of the striking workers brought hand-made matches from Calcutta in bulk and started selling those in the town. "The strikers have adopted the course of parading the local villages with Calcutta matches for sale and advising the local people to boycott Swedish matches."73 states the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district in his report to the Government.

An adjournment motion was moved in the Assembly for the purpose of discussing the affairs and labour movement of AMCO by Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed which was supported by Abdul Matin Chowdhury and Arun Kumar Chanda (Congress members of the Assembly). The motion was hotly debated but was defeated by a narrow margin of four votes (47-51).76 But the Sadulla Ministry now agreed to form a Conciliation Board to look into the matters of AMCO. The Board consisted of five members with Mr. Cautlie, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley as its President. (Other members of the Board were Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, MLA, Omeo Kumar Das, KLA, Badruddin Ahmed MLA and Mr. Parida MLA. Ataur Rehman, the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara was appointed the Secretary of the Board).77 The Government also withdrew the ban on the strikers who were made special constables on 22 May. (Six workers who were made special constables were, however, proceeded against for violating the

75. Home Political File (FR), No.18/7/37, First half, July, 1937.
76. Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (1937), Shillong, 1938, pp 188-90, 583-86; also Home Political File (FR), No.18/8/37, First half, August, 1937 and Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 5, 1937.
77. Ibid., 20 July, 1937.
The Conciliation Board had its first sitting on 23 September, i.e., after nine months since the beginning of the strike. The Board heard both the sides but its decision went in favour of the management by 3-2 votes. "The Conciliation Board appointed to investigate the Dhubri Match Factory dispute failed without having attained any practical settlement, not even unity of opinion among themselves."

The workers' high hopes of getting a favourable decision from the Conciliation Board were shattered. They fought for nearly one year to achieve their goal but now frustration crept in. Fighting against heavy odds for nearly a year, now they had no alternative but to submit. In the meantime the factory started functioning and through a skeleton services (with the help of skilled and semi-skilled labourers brought from outside) production was resumed in September. The strikers, morally broken and frustrated, could not take the risk of their job any more. In October-November most of the strikers approached the management for re-appointment. The management, after careful consideration and screening, reappointed most of the workers except those activists who took lead in the strike, among whom were included Bankulal Mukherjee, the Secretary of the Action Committee of the Union, Munir Mian etc. "Of the 282 persons now working in the factory, 270 are strikers and the number will be increased by 15 to 20 more in the near future," states a Government report of November 1937.

78. Ibid., 23 Sept., 1937.
79. Home Political File (FR), No.18/9/37, Second half, Sept., 1937
80. Home Political File (FR), No.18/10/37, First half, Oct., 1937; also interview with Bepin Chandra Chakravarty.
81. Home Political File (FR), No.18/10/37, Second half, Oct., 1937
Though the strikers were taken back, they had to sign an agreement with the Company that they would not participate in any sort of violence and would have "to cooperate with the company management in future in running the factory." All of them were also verbally instructed not to participate in the activities of the Union. This was a great blow to the union and its activities were practically suspended till 1943.  

Though the strikers did not succeed, the importance of the strike cannot be overestimated. Firstly, it was the first organised trade union movement of the district of undivided Goalpara as well as the state. Secondly, the most positive aspect of this strike was that it exhibited the labours' solidarity as a class which in itself was an achievement from the point of view of maturing labour consciousness. Thirdly, for the first time labour received serious attention of the political parties of the state. Non-plantation labour was discussed and debated for the first time in the floor of the Legislative Assembly of the State. Fourthly, it attracted serious attention of important trade union leaders of India who gave public press statement supporting the cause of match factory workers. Lastly, it encouraged other wage-earning and exploited labour of the locality to organise and exert their rights in near future.

82. Interview with Bepin Chandra Chakravarty, (a typed copy of the proforma of the agreement was in possession of Chakravarty).
83. Ibid.
84. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 14 July, 1937; also Asamiya, 23 Jan 1937 and 22 Feb. 1937