CHAPTER - V

THE ASSAM OIL COMPANY WORKERS' STRIKE OF 1939

The AOC Workers' Union and the management of the AOC were definitely heading for a more serious confrontation by the beginning of 1939. Inspite of repeated representation of the Union to the Company to stop dismissal of workers, the AOC authorities sacked as many as 74 workers from service between November 1938 and April 1939. The Union in its letter to the Company dated 22 Feb. 1939 challenged the Company’s rights to dismiss the workers, at its sweet will. The management claimed that these were surplus hands and there were not enough work for them in the Company. In fact, the dismissal became the central issue of confrontation between the management and the workers, as service security was related with the issue. This becomes clear from a communication, which the Union sent to the management in July 1938:

“As regards the condition of workers of your Company, to say the least, you

The workers were sacked in several batches as follows:

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   (A note prepared by J.N. Bhuyan, General Secretary, AOC Labour Union). The file consists
   a number of letters, and other correspondence of the Union with the AICC and AOC
   management. It also contains some press statements and appeals made by the union
   executives.
have not even thought necessary to provide for indispensable amenities of life and ordinary service rules for your workers. Your workers do not even know under which rules they are employed and discharged. There are no safeguards against wrongful dismissals. There is no security of service which ought to be guaranteed by the Company, not only in the interests of the workers, but also in the interest of the Company. Security of service is the most vitally-necessary condition for the best and efficient working of any industry. Yet the Company does not care to fulfill that condition. The workers, putting up efficient services from 25/30 years, do not know what benefits they are entitled to on termination of their services. There are no provisions for gratuity or old age pension."

Meanwhile, the Company accorded preliminary recognition to the Union on 3 March, 1939, (The official communication in this respect, however, was sent on 20 March, 1939), but at the same time declared that the non-unionised workers would be allowed to represent their cases directly to the Company. The Company notification, dated 20 March, 1939 ran in these words: "The Company has recognised the Assam Oil Company Labour Union as competent to represent its members. Members and non-members will be treated equally by the Company in all respects. Any employee or group of employees can bring their trouble to the Labour Superintendent in exactly the same way as hitherto if they wish to do so."

The Union, naturally, protested. It pointed out that the contents of the notification is contradictory in spirit. The Union in its letter, dated 27 March, 1939,

4. AICC Papers, op. cit. vide f n. 2 above.
wrote to the Company: “Regarding your notification about recognition of the Union, we would like to point out that it was issued without any consultation with the Union. The text of the notification needs improvement and elucidation. We would like to bring to your notice that the notification has created a good deal of misunderstanding among workers regarding the intention of the Company and the nature of recognition of their Union”.6

This was due to the fact that in the first paragraph of the notification the Company had stated that ‘The Company has recognised the Assam Oil Company Labour Union as competent to represent its members” but in the next two paragraphs the Company has given undue emphasis on the equality of treatment of members and non-members alike and on the continuation of the same system of representation of grievances of its employees through the Labour Superintendent exactly in the same way as before’. The Union further pointed out that the very recognition of the Union meant restriction of Company’s unilateral and arbitrary reinstatement of dismissal hands as it was “absolutely essential to restore good faith and calmer atmosphere”.7 But the Company management did not respond favourably. The Union, in its correspondence with the management, now categorically stated that they would be compelled to declare strike unless these unabated dismissals and illegal retrenchment were stopped forthwith.8

On 2 April, a general meeting of the Union was held in which unanimous decision was taken against continuation of any further discussion with the Company and to go on a protest strike for a week.9 Following is the extract of the resolution:

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6. Ibid.
7. AICC Papers. vide fn. 2 above. A letter to the Union from AOC 20 Feb 1939, quoted in a note prepared by J.N. Bhuyan.
8. Ibid. AOC Labour Union Secretary’s letter to the management dated 21 March 1939.
"This General Meeting, after carefully considering the situation created by the Company by the continuous and persistent dismissals of workers batch by batch on the plea of reduction of staff, over and above the failure on the part of the Company to reinstate other dismissed and victimised workers during the period under dispute and to fulfill their vital from long, is compelled to come to the conclusion that all attempts of the Union Executive to reason with the Company during the long period in order to solve satisfactorily the burning problem of dismissal and other outstanding issues have definitely failed..... This meeting accordingly declares to go on a protest strike for one week from Monday morning, as has been notified to the Company, as a mark of protest against the policy and to get their just demands fulfilled according to the repeated ultimatum presented to the Company".\(^{10}\) The strike started from 6 a.m. of 3 April, 1939.

Almost all the workers of the Assam Oil Company based at Digboi and at Tinsukia (where the Company had its tin-plating factory) struck work. Even the sweepers and the bungalow servants, the direct recruits and the contractors’ labourers joined the strike.\(^{11}\) However, 130 employees were allowed by the Union to maintain essential services like hospitals and water supply.\(^{12}\) "It was, with exception of some arrangement for disbursing and receiving of salaries and wages and for medical aids, conservancy and lighting, a complete strike of more or less 6000 workers in Digboi and 4000 workers in Tinsukia",\(^{13}\) admitted even the Government Enquiry Committee Report.

\(^{10}\) AICC Papers, extracts from the copy of resolutions adopted unanimously at the general meeting of ten thousand workers including contractor’s labour, and cent per cent members of the AOC. Labour Union and Mazdoor Sangh, held on Sunday, 2 April, 1939.


\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) M.N. Mukherjee, Report, op. cit.
Right from the very beginning, the Company branded the strike as politically motivated having no connection with any economic issue. The management were optimistic that the strike would break soon as it was an amateurist venture on the part of the newly formed Trade Union. However, when the workers showed excellent solidarity and the strikers became successful in mobilising public opinion in their favour, the company took it as a prestige issue and tried to crush it by all possible means. They now decided to use strong-arm methods and convince the local administration about the possible breach of peace and the need for protection of the Company’s vital installation. The local administration requisitioned eight platoons of Assam Rifles as well as armed police for the protection of the area.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, in his the personal initiative the IGP added two more platoons.\textsuperscript{15} The Governor of Assam wrote to Governor-General Linlithgow on 4 April, 1939, “The long threatened strike at Digboi has been broken out and it has been found necessary to reinforce the local police at Digboi and Tinsukia by the platforms of Assam Rifles.”\textsuperscript{16}

The over-enthusiastic District Magistrate enforced disarmament of volunteers who had been participating in the strike.\textsuperscript{17} Under orders from the Magistrate, the military began to snatch away the flags and to tear them and trample them. Under the order of disarmament, the volunteers and the strikers who were carrying flags - each flag containing a stick - were asked to get disarmed by removing the sticks from the flags. In some cases, between 3 and 8 April, the flags were forcibly taken out by

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\textsuperscript{14} File No. L/P and J/2580 Chief Secretary’s confidential Report dt. 17 April 1939, Oriental and India Office collections, London, U.K
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid; It contains the Governor’s situation report on Assam, dt. 17 April 1939 where he justified his personal initiative.
\textsuperscript{16} MSS Eur. F 125/32 Linlithgow papers, Do. No. 25, Twynam to Linlithgow, dt. 4 April 1939. OIOC. London
\textsuperscript{17} Home Political File (FR) No. 18/4/39, First half, April 1939
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military soldiers and were torn out by them, presumably under instructions from the Magistrate Umaruddin and the Superintendent of Police at Tinsukia and Digboi.\(^{18}\)

Within three days, the situation began to aggravate due to high handedness of some Company officials. In the evening of 6 April, Tainsh, the Cost Engineer of the Company, accompanied by two syces, on the back of two ponies rushed about from place to place in Digboi with a polo stick in hand. He knocked down quite a few number of volunteers with the head of his horse and with his polo stick.* He abused the volunteers and the strikers by calling them “Red-Shirt Monkeys”, which made the workers furious. In fact, that Tainsh wanted to provoke the peaceful volunteers and this was admitted by Gunning, the General Manager of the Assam Oil Company, before Omeo Kumar Das, MLA and Secretary of the Congress Assembly Party, and he regretted that he made no attempt to restrict the European officer though he restricted the movement of the volunteers in the area under Section 144 Cr.P.C. Immediately after the declaration of the strike, the AOC Management planned to start new recruitment instead of negotiating to resolve the dispute with the workers. This measure was aimed at breaking the morale of the workers. Right from the beginning of 4 April the local police and the military, along with Company’s people, visited Railway Stations, mostly during nights, and forcibly induced the outside labourers to join the AOC. In order to put a stop to the peaceful picketing by the Union volunteers, they assaulted people, roused them from sleep at nights, offered them higher wages, some were even forcibly carried with them for the purpose of recruitment.\(^{20}\) The houses of the bungalow servants which were adjacent to the bungalow of the Officers were reportedly ransacked. “The Company people brought out and

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18. M.N. Mukherjee Enquiry Committee Report 25 Nov. 1939, Evidence no VIII.* This has been narrated by eye witnesses Ganga Lohar and Radhikaram Singh
19. Ibid., Evidence no II; also AICC papers, vide fn. 2 above.
20. Ibid., Evidence no. I
cast away or misappropriated the articles that were in the rooms. The incidents range from about 5 or 6 days after the commencement of the strike to about 6 weeks or even 2 months later....".21 On 4 April, about 20 to 30 volunteers were assaulted by the Police. One volunteer named Beni Madhav was abused by Misra, Officer-in-charge of the Digboi Police Station who was injured and fell down on the ground. The agitated volunteers assembled in the thana premises with a threatening attitude.22 Agitated by these measures, the workers started Satyagraha in different parts of Digboi and Tinsukia from 7th April, 1939.23 The high handedness of the Police could be evidenced from the fact that the peaceful Satyagrahis were subjected to severe harassment by the Company management and the police tried to remove them by force wielding fixed bayonets.24

The local administration promulgated orders under Section 144 Cr.P.C. on 8 April, 1939 restricting the assembly of four or more persons. The District Magistrate observed, "emergency has arisen in the areas lying within the radius of three miles of Tinsukia and Digboi Police Station owing to unlawful activities of bands of Labour Union Volunteers."25

Through a notification dated 7 April, 1939, the Company warned that unless they joined the Company and resume work before 10 April, they (the workers) would lose their jobs. "Any man failing to return to work on Monday, the 10th April or before cannot be guaranteed re-employment. From that date the Company

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21. Ibid., Evidence no. VII
22. Ibid., Ancillary Enquiry (A) against the Police Officers.
23. AICC Papers, File No. G. 39. TI No 1161, "Digboi Strike, 1939", NMML, New Delhi, (A note prepared by J.N. Bhuyan, of General Secretary, AOC Labour Union)
24. Ibid.
25. Assam Gazette, 1939, Part I (Shillong), 5 July, 1939; order of C.S. Gunning, District Magistrate, Lakhimpur, 5 April, 1939.
will consider itself free to engage others, which means that only such former employees as are necessary to complete the staff will have any chance of obtaining re-employment.” Bulletin no. 3 of 1939 dated 8 April stated, “Any man who come to work during the strike need have no fear that they will be discharged under the conditions of Settlement. The Company would never agree to such a condition.”

At the same time, the Company was also preparing to engage new men as observed later by K.K.Hazra of the Conciliation Board.

However, the developments during 2 to 9 April convinced the workers that Company would not listen to their demands and, therefore the workers assembled at a meeting on 9 April and adopted a resolution, “to continue the strike due to company’s unyielding attitude.” Thus, the strike which was originally meant for a week, became indefinite. The Company made it very clear that they were going to recruit new men. Between 10 and 13 April, they, in fact, recruited more than 100 new hands. AOC advertisement to recruit new hands appeared in local daily Teenidiniya Asamiya on 14 April, 1939. It read, "Clerks wanted at Digboi ..........., Men who know their names to be in the waiting list for clerks at Digboi and others with less than 'Passed Matriculation' qualifications who are desirous of taking up vacancies created by the strike should send written application to the General Manager at Digboi as soon as possible. Those selected will receive instructions for joining within a few days. Accommodation will be available for them but not for families.”

Stating clearly that they would not accept the Union's demands, (Vide Bulletin

26. Assam Gazette, 1939, Part II (Shillong), 20 December, 1939.
28. Ibid; also Assam Gazette, op. cit.; Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (May 1939), Shillong, pp. 190-91
29. Teenidiniya Asamiya 14 April, 1939.
no. 4 of 1939) the Company declared: "the Company wishes to make it clear to all its employees that they have nothing to gain by continuing this strike, because the Company is not going to yield to the Unions' demands. On the contrary, they have much to lose, because their jobs are being filled up by new men, who will not be discharged to make room for the strikers. There are over 130 men at work today, 100 of them are new. How many tomorrow? Think carefully. How much pay will be due to you at the end of this month?" In its Bulletin no. 7 dated 22 April, 1939, the Company declared: "The Company has already made it clear that it will not take back all the men who have gone on strike, since new men have been engaged for certain jobs and they will not be discharged to make room for the old men." A Government Communique confirms that the Company replaced their watchmen by the new Nepali recruits. This naturally infuriated the workers, and they now drew attention of the Provincial Government to stop such recruitments. Before the Government could intervene, The Statesman - the mouthpiece of the European business interest started defending the Assam Oil Company Management. "The staff reduction had no connection with any issues outstanding between the Company and its employees, being merely a normal routine reduction of man who had become surplus to requirements for the work available. There was also a number of temporary hands at Digboi who were due for reduction on the completion of major construction work in the Refinery for which they had been engaged .......... Both these cases of staff reduction were a matter of normal procedure in any industry" reported The Statesman.

The district administration at that stage started acting in a concert with the AOC

31. Home Political File (FR), op. cit
32. The Statesman, 23 April, 1939, and 27 June 1939.
administration to crush the strike. The workers' meetings were disrupted by the military under the cloak of Sec. 144 and new recruits were given protection by the Assam Rifles. "The part played by the district administration of the Government of Assam was that of absolute partiality since the commencement of the strike and this was being objected by the Labour Union. They persistently refused to lend any ear to the allegations made by the Labour Union that the Assam Rifles posted at Digboi on the plea of protecting AOC's property but actually they were being used for recruiting. Omeo Kumar Das, member of the Assam Legislative Assembly met the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur and also the Superintendent of Police and asked them to enquire into these allegations. But they paid no attention. On the other hand, all sorts of allegations against the Labour Union were being made at the Police Station by the Company and the District Executive, on the basis of these reports promulgated an order under Section 144 Cr.P.C. restricting the carrying of lathis by volunteers and also Khukri by Nepalis, though there were no specific case of violence against any of these volunteers. If there were any at all, the ordinary law was sufficient to deal with them. No single volunteer was prosecuted for any acts of violence. But on the other hand, the District Executive refused to inquire into the allegations made in writing to the Police Officers. It is clear that the AOC authorities with the direct and indirect help of the military and District administration played the old game of provoking the Union Volunteers to violence although to no success."33

The worst tragedy occurred in the evening of 18 April when the Digboi town seem to have passed outside the pale of any civilized government. At about 6 p.m., four of the Labour Union Volunteers were assaulted by riflemen without any reason and the attitude of the police and military personnel was provocative. The Secretary

33 Extracts from Press statement of 8 MLAs who were present at the Judicial Enquiry at Digboi. Source - AICC papers, op. cit.
of the Labour Union complained to the Magistrate but he did not give any importance to the incident. The worst was still to come three hours later. The Police opened fire on the group of volunteers who blocked a road and obstructed movement of a group of Policemen, who were accompanied by some Company officials. They opened fire on the crowd without provocation or without giving any warning. In fact, these riflemen accompanied by the Company's Officials were travelling in a AOC van, which was going to bring new recruits, through Chariali Basti. Possibly the volunteers wanted to obstruct the AOC van to return back. However, on being obstructed, the occupants of the van opened fire resulting in the death of three persons: Praneswar Chowdhuri, Satyendra Chakravarty and Chandra Ahir. While Chowdhuri and Chakravarty died on the spot, Ahir expired sometime later.

Regarding the firing incident and the period that followed immediately thereafter, we will refer to a statement issued by eight MLAs (who were prominent leaders of Assam) to the Press which is self-explanatory: “On the 18th night, three persons were killed by firing. Even after the tragic incident the part played by the District Executive clearly indicates that they have a bias against the Trade Union Movement - the first of its kind in Assam ............ Anarchy and chaos became the order for the time being. The Magistrate who was specially posted at Digboi was not brought to the scene by the Police authorities. Though reinforcements after reinforcements were being brought from the Military Headquarters but no one paid any heed to the fact that there was a Magistrate nearby and that the town of Digboi was still within the benign British administration and under British law a Magistrate was required to order dispersal before any order of firing could be given. But curiously

34. Ibid
35. Interview with eye-witnesses Ganga Lohar and Radhikaram Singh; also National Herald, 28 May 1939, and Advance, 28 April 1939.
enough, however, it was the Labour Union Secretary who ran to the Magistrate to inform him of the firing and to seek his protection."36

The vernacular newspaper *Teenidiniya Asamiya* reports, "The Digboi strike has taken a serious turn. On yesterday night three persons were killed and twelve injured by police firing. It was reported that some European Officials of the Company, along with military men were going to bring new recruits from nearby bastis. When obstructed by some volunteers, they opened fire .......... The firing was not ordered by the Magistrate. He was also not present on the spot of incident."

Interestingly, the police wanted to hide the entire issue. The Superintendent of Police informed the higher authorities after three hours of the occurrence of the incident. But he never mentioned that some European AOC Officials were present in the van. Curiously, the FIR was lodged at the police station that the "two dead bodies were seen being removed to refinery enclosures by some AOC Officers at night and three bodies still remain untraced." Two retired employees of AOC, both eye witnesses of the firing incident strongly believe that the ultimate number of casualties were higher. Apart from those who died, at least two members of the Union have remained untraced since the firing incident.38 *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, also refers to the death of a fourth person later *

36. AICC papers, vide f.n.2 above. [Press statement issued by Hem Chandra Baruah, B I President of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee, Bishnu Ram Medhi, Ex President, Assam Provincial Congress Committee, Omeo Kumar Das, Secretary, Congress Assembly party, Siddhi Nath Sarmah, Secretary, Assam Provincial Congress Committee, Boliram Das, M.L.A, Sankar Chandra Baruah, M.L.A., Debesarw Sarmah, chief whip, Krishnath Sarmah, Lakheswar Baruah, M.L.A., Rajani Kanta Baruah, M.L.A. who were present at the Judicial Enquiry at Digboi.]


38. Assam police abstract of Intelligence; also referred to in the statement of 8 M I S H k - t n., 35 above "Ananda Bazar Patrika, 23 April 1939 and interview with Ganga Lohar and Radhikaram Singh
The eye witnesses, including the ambulance driver had something more to add to this episode. The driver of the ambulance, who removed the dead bodies and the injured, gave evidence that, when he went to pick-up those bodies, the ambulance men were also fired upon by the police, which leads to the suspicion that police themselves were not eager to part with the bodies. Three persons who were officially declared killed in the firing were: (a) Satyen Chakravarty, aged 28 years. Chakravarty originally hailed from Jessore and was serving as a clerk in the Company. (b) Praneshwar Chowdhury, aged about 35 years. His original house was at Guwahati and he served as a chemist in the Company. (c) Chandra Ahir, aged about 40 years. He hailed from Gorakhpur region of central provinces.

The persons who suffered bullet injuries were: (i) Madhu Pashi (ii) Harihar Tewari (iii) Jogesh Nath (iv) Bhulo Ahir (v) Bhagabati (vi) Ghuram (vii) Asamata Ali (viii) Bangsha Bahadur (ix) Ramabali (x) Modhi (xi) Sukari Ahir (xii) A. Miah

There were serious lapses of records in the official files also. Though nowhere recorded officially, another person named Sadhu aged 45 who was severely injured in the firing on 18 April, expired at the hospital on 22 April 1939.39

39. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 21 April and 23 April 1939. This was endorsed by wife of Satyen Chakravarty who was killed in the police firing on 18 April 1939 at Digboi. Chakravarty, is still living and residing at Bangaon, near Calcutta, in West Bengal. In June 1997, After 58 years of the incident, the AOC Labour Union handed over an amount of Rs. 1 lakh to Mrs. Chakravarty as a mark of respect to their late Comrade who died for the workers' cause (See Ananda Bazar Patrika, 27 June, 1997, p. 5 for a report on the subject). [As per statement of the 8 MLAs, who went to Digboi on 19-20 April, the Magistrate recieved no specific instruction from the Deputy Commissioner regarding holding of an enquiry. It was after being pressed by the MLAs, the magistrate issued a general notification on 20 April, 1939, asking any people knowing anything relating to the firing incident to appear before him and that he was conducting a Judicial Enquiry. The MLAs further said that till 20 April, the injured people were not given any treatment in the AOC Hospital and the DC, who was staying as AOC's guest in the AOC bungalow, never bothered to go to the hospital to see the injured persons. (AICC Papers).]
The news of death of workers in police firing spread like wild fire throughout the oil belt and also in the adjoining tea gardens. At Tinsukia, where the Company had its tinplate factory, all the shops remained closed and the town observed instant hartal. Ananda Bazar Patrika published the photographs of the dead bodies of three workers and gave a vivid description of the day when the bodies arrived at Tinsukia enroute to Dibrugarh where those were being sent for post-mortem. : “............... All shops of Tinsukia closed instantly. When the Dibru -Sadiya Railways train arrived at Tinsukia carrying three dead bodies - thousands of people, both male and female were present at the station. Hindus and muslims joined together to observe a total hartal in the town. ............ In the evening a huge condolence meeting was held at the municipal ground which was presided by the local Muslim League President Md. Ibrahim. One hundred telegrams were sent on that day by leading citizens of Tinsukia to Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarat Bose registering protest and urging them to intervene and exercise their office to take action against the company."40

In protest of the firing, Dibru -Sadiya Railway workers union declared Hartal for 24 hours on 20 April which resulted in total suspension of train services that day. Motor Bus Union also observed total strike thus paralysing the whole transportation network. “Except a train carrying mails which was operated by European drivers, no other train could be operated”, reported Calcutta Press.41

Potraying a vivid description of the funeral of the firing victims (along with two photographs), Ananda Bazar Patrika wrote, “After completing the post-mortem at Dibrugarh, the dead bodies arrived at Digboi on 20 April. A 15,000 strong mourners followed them. Local Sikh community showed their respect in Military custom by

40. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 24 April, 1939, Page-24
41. Ibid and Amrita Bazar Patrika, 24 April, 1939.
holding their swords in the hand. With Kirpans in their hand they took position in the front and side of the hearse throughout the procession. As the Management of the Company refused to allow the procession to be passed through the roads in the vicinity of the Company, the Superintendent of Police permitted the processionists to pass only through the Local Board roads and their original scheduled route has to be changed. It is a strange and astonishing fact that though 400 sepoys, police Superintendent, Magistrates and other peace keepers were present to maintain peace during the procession, a non-violent peaceful funeral procession was not allowed to pass through the vicinity of the Company streets. A stunning silence was observed during the procession, though occasionally conchshells were blown. At 1 P.M. the procession arrived at Golai Basti where a meeting was held to pay the last tribute to the departed souls. Then the procession arrived at Digboi cremation ground where the bodies were consigned to flames. Later the ashes were kept at the union field.

A Judicial Enquiry was ordered by the Government of Assam to look into the firing incident, which was conducted by Pabitranath Das, Magistrate. Several eye witnesses confirmed to the Magistrate that three Company Officials - Towler, the Labour Superintendent, Gillespie and Tainsh were responsible for the firing which resulted in the death of three persons. But the Magistrate acquitted the European officers from these charges. He submitted his report on 17 May, 1939. His findings were:

1. That the death of Praneswar Chowdhuri and Satyendra Chakravarty were caused by rifle shots fired by the riflemen Janardan Paniram's party;
2. That the riflemen fired in self defence when faced with an attack by a hostile mob of several hundreds;
3. That Chandra Ahir was shot down by the Lieutenant Murray in self defence.

42. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 24 April, 1939.
when the latter was attacked by a hostile mob;

(4) That they all in the course of patrol duty, exercised the right of private defence on being attacked by the mob;

(5) That none of the Assam Oil Company's employees were with the riflemen at that time;

(6) That none of the three Europeans on whom charges have been labelled - Tainsh, Towler, Gillespie (employees of the Company) - fired on the mob or shot down any member of the mob.43

Unfortunately for the workers, the Magistrate's findings were partisan to the management. The so-called "self-defence" theory to justify firing was also echoed in the telegram of the Governor to the Viceroy, "...... Police patrol deliberately ambushed and stoned opened fire in self-defence."44 The Governor of Assam justified firing to the Secretary of States for India, Government of U.K., by stating, "Firing by police on 18th April night occasioned by mob cutting off van containing six riflemen returning from patrol."45

The Press immediately took up the issue. The nationalist newspapers like The Indian Mirror, Ananda Bazar Patrika, Jugantar, Advance, The National Herald, The Hindusthan Standard, etc. severely criticised the findings of the Magistrate which they termed as absolutely biased. Even, the local press of Assam carried on verification reports of the post-mortem of the firing victims. It was stated in the post-mortem report that one of the three victims had bullet injury in the dead body. This confirms the doubt that the Company's European Officials were involved in the firing incident.

43. The Statesman, 25 May, 1939.
44. MSS. Eur., F/125/32, Do. No. 46, Linglithgow papers OIOC, London.
45. File No. L/PJ/7/2580 - Telegram dated 22/4/1939, from the Governor of Assam to the Secretary of State for India, OIOC, London.
as the other victims had cartridge injuries. Apart from that, the firing was unprovoked and absolutely unjustified and resorted to without any authorisation as only a Magistrate is authorised to order a firing. No Magistrate was present at the time of the firing incident.\textsuperscript{46} The National Herald, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Advance and the public in general vehemently criticised the Magisterial Report. The National Herald wrote: “The Magistrate’s report on Digboi firing and his curious concluding remarks have come as a terrible shock to the public. For reasons best known to himself, the Magistrate has gone to the length of stating categorically that no Officer of the Company were at all present during the firing. He rejected, without any enquiry, the charges made by the two eye-witnesses that they saw in their own eyes some Company Officers firing shots. The firing began due to the entry of a military lorry in the bye-lane at the \textit{Chariali Basii} outside the Company’s area and where the Company had no properties to guard at night after 9.25 p.m. The Magistrate did not even care to answer what justifiable business the military had to come there at night…….” The Magistrate also seems to have failed to take note of the fact that the military lorry came there not as a result of breach of peace, but the alleged result of breach of peace occurred due to arrival of the lorry at a place outside their jurisdiction “…….. The Magistrate seems to have cared little to answer why deadly shots were fired at a different road where there was no blockade?”\textsuperscript{47} observed The National Herald.

Similar question was raised even in the British Parliament, where members demanded a statement in the House from the Under Secretary of the State for India about, “The use of troops against the strikers in the Oil Fields of Assam; in particular, whether they opened fires on the strikers without previous warning: …… and whether

\textsuperscript{46} Teenidiniya Asamiya, 12 May, 1939 and 16 May, 1939.
\textsuperscript{47} The National Herald, 28 May, 1939.
the troops were asked for by the Provincial Government?" In reply, I.A. Col. Muirhead, the Under Secretary of State for India gave a very distorted reply. He said, "In answer to first part of the question, no troops have been employed in connection with the strike at Digboi. The subsequent parts of the questions do not, therefore, arise. A patrol of the Assam Rifles, however, was involved on the 18th April in a shooting incident in which 3 persons were killed and 5 injured, apart from injuries to members of the patrol.

The Assam Rifles are police and their actions are within the responsibility for law and order of the Provincial Government." 49

The observers of the firing incident felt that had the police taken timely decision and action, after the incident that occurred in the evening in which four volunteers were injured, the unfortunate incident of firing could have been avoided. Surprisingly, the two Magistrates who were specifically posted at Digboi were not possibly knowing what role they were to play. It may seem strange but it was true that these two Magistrates were not authorised, even in 1939, "to receive any complaint against the European Officers." 50 The mess and the overall chaos that followed at Digboi before and after the firing incident of 18 April is a sequel, partially, of powerlessness of Indian Magistrates under the benign British administration.

The Governor of Assam H.J. Twynam, however, had reasons to be happy at the findings of the Magisterial enquiry. In a letter to Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy, he writes, "I am glad to say that any attempts which may have been made to intimidate the

49. Ibid., Reply of the Lt Col. Muirhead in the House of Commons.
50. AICC Papers, Statement of 8 MLAs. vide f.n.2 and 23 above.
Magistrate have been frustrated and the judgment completely exonerates the Company's Officers from the charges preferred against them and comes to a finding that the police fired in self-defence."

Though the Finance Minister, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed visited Digboi, the labour Minister, Ramanath Das did not visit the aggrieved workers immediately. That created widespread resentment among the workers. As the findings of the Judicial Enquiry did not satisfy the workers, the Government considered to take some further remedial steps. Infact, the strike attracted so much of public attention, for various reasons, particularly the completeness and determined nature of the strike and the firing incident, and the wide media coverage by the National Press,** that the Government now felt the necessity of taking some concrete steps and it decided to appoint a Committee of Enquiry. The Committee was appointed with Manmathanath Mukherjee, ex-Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court, as President and G.D. Walker as a member, on 10 July, 1939, with the following terms of reference:

(1) To enquire into the events leading to the incident of 18 April and into those subsequent thereto in so far as they are not sub judice.

(2) To enquire into the measures and actions taken by local authorities before, during and after the occurrence; and

(3) To consider the origin and causes of the strike and to suggest means whereby strikes of this nature can be avoided in future.  

51. MSS/Eur/F3069, letter from H.J. Twynam, Governor of Assam to Lord Linlithgow Viceroy of India, dt. 10/5/1939 - DO No. 38; also referred to in File No. L/P 8/2580, OIOC. UK

** The National Press, particularly The National Herald, Ananda Bazar Patrika, Hindustan Standard, Amrita Bazar Patrika, etc. championed the workers' cause which helped in mobilising public opinion in favour of the striking workers.

52. Resolution No.4420-H, Orders by the Governor of Assam cited in Assam Gazette, July, 1939.

53. Ibid.
The AOC management tried to bring division among the workers on linguistic and communal lines. Since the formation of the Union, the Company loyalists were trying to convince the Muslim workers of the Company that the Union was a Congress organisation and they should refrain from joining it. Even they were encouraged to form parallel Union. At a stage the Muslim workers were influenced by the Digboi Anjuman (a religious organisation under the influence of the Muslim League) not to join the Union and the proposed strike, it even threatened its members that they will be expelled in case they join the strike. Being cautious, some Congress Socialist leaders who were active behind the formation of the Union, now started to avoid attending Meetings of the Union so that the Muslim workers could be convinced that it was not a Congress controlled organisation. The Company, in a communication, noted that the Muslim workers were, “quite definite in their refusal to join any organisation backed by Congress”. The Union tactfully handled the situation and Muslim Trade Union leaders of All India stature like Abdul Bari, Jallaluddin Hashmi etc. were brought to Digboi which restored the confidence of the Muslim workers and the Union ultimately succeeded in getting their support.* Maulvi Abaans Sobhan Arifi, Vice-President of Jamiet-ul-Ulema was also brought to Digboi who addressed a public meeting on 14 May, 1939 and promised to extend all possible help to the strikers. He talked to the Muslim workers and later submitted a report to Gopi Nath Bardoloi giving details of his experience.57

54. The Statesman and The Amrita Bazar Patrika wrote frequently on this issue between May 1938 to July 1939; also Home Political File (FR) No 18/8/38, Second Half, August 1938.
55. Home Political File, Fortnightly reports 18/2/38, Second Half, February 1938
* It is interesting to note that even Muslim League convened a meeting of the Muhammadan strikers of Digboi and Tinsukia in June and it passed a resolution requesting Mr Mohammad Ali Jinnah to intervene (Ref: The Statesman 15 June 1939).
57. Advance, 20 May 1939.
That the Company did not succeed in influencing the Muslim workers to keep aloof from the Union could be verified from the fact that the local Muslim League, which had a considerable influence on the workers sent telegrams to the provincial Muslim League President to support the demands of the workers. It also criticised the Company officials for illegally beating the workers.\(^{58}\) Interestingly, the State Muslim League leadership, at that stage, was supporting the British to protect their own community interest. However, the Muslim workers of the Company did not subscribe to the views expressed by the Muslim League leaders of the province and thereby showed exemplary working class consciousness.

In its efforts to foil the strike, the Company, also wanted to introduce a local and regional factor to the entire issue. Considering the fact most of the striking workers, were non-Assamese and outsiders (the Company had only 12.17% workers from Assam and 87.83% recruits were from other states on the eve of the strike)\(^{59}\), the Company, now, wanted to exploit the situation. Through local notice board advertisements, the Company called applications to fill-up the vacancies from the Assamese-speaking people only. “The Company had advertised for Assamese and considerable number of these have come to Tinsukia and Digboi”.\(^{60}\) This was done clearly with two motives: firstly, to secure local support and secondly, to put the Union in a delicate position as they could not speak openly against these Assamese people because in that case they would antagonise the local people and thus lose local support. Even the intelligence report admitted that “the recruitment of local men by the Company placed the strike Committee in an awkward position, as they did not want to alienate Assamese

\(^{58}\) Ananda Bazar Patrika, 8 April, 1939.
\(^{59}\) File no L/P&J/2580, contained in letter from W.E. Abraham of BOC to A. Dibdin of India office, White Hall, OIOC, London.
\(^{60}\) Home Political File (FR) No. 18/5/39, First half, May 1939.
sentiment".61 "This is reflected in the speeches and meetings (of the Union leaders), which appeared inspired by anxiety at this development combined with a wish to avoid giving offence to the Assamese" reported the Chief Secretary of the Govt. of Assam in a communication to the higher authorities.62

Some vested interests wanted to grab the opportunity to recruit local labour. An organisation named Assam Welfare League surfaced in Upper Assam with an intention to fill-up the vacancies caused by the strike. Similarly, another organisation named Dibrugarh Unemployment Bureau also appeared on the scene. The Statesman reported ".....Meanwhile, certain interests, anxious to take advantage of the avenues of employment thrown open by the strike have started a 'back-to-work' campaign on behalf of their communities. The Assam Welfare League has held several meetings on behalf of Assam Labour in neighbouring towns, but in each case obstructing elements have proved too strong"63 "Dibrugarh Unemployment Bureau sent three batches of labourers collected from purely Assamese unemployed youths," stated Advance.64 We get reference of yet another organisation named "The Assam Unemployed Association" which set upon the task of sending Assamese labourers from neighbouring villages daily to Digboi for unskilled works to the Assam Oil Company since middle of May 1939.65

Meanwhile, the imperialist Press and the European Planters combine raised a hue and cry concerning the security of the Europeans in Digboi. In fact, consequent to the strike, in which the bungalow servants as well as the manual staff joined

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62. File no. L/P&I/2580, [Report of the Chief Secretary., Govt. of Assam], OIOC, London
63. The Statesman, 11 May, 1939
64. Advance, 24 May, 1939
65. The Statesman, 24 May, 1939
voluntarily, some European families were shifted to the Company’s General Hospital which was practically converted into a guest house by the Company. The entire hospital was brought under heavy security. Later, gradually the women and children of the European families were sent out of Digboi by the management “on security considerations”. The imperialist Press, both in India and abroad published stories stating that the strikers and the shopkeepers in Digboi wanted to exploit the Europeans in every possible way after the firing incident. Newspapers were publishing stories regarding the victimisation of the Europeans by local traders. The Times (London) reported: “A strike on the Assam Oil Company’s field at Digboi has extended to some of the domestic servants of Europeans, and members of the Company’s staff are now doing their own shopping and having to pay exhorbitant prices. Some of the wives and children of Europeans have left the District”.66 The Statesman wrote, “One European, disguised as a native, tried to get food at cheaper rates. However, on being detected, he had to pay extra high prices. He was charged one rupee for a loaf and eight annas for each egg. Digboi was almost degraded to a state, resembling a siege”.67 Later, on the direction of the AOC Manager, the ladies and children were removed from Digboi to Shillong and other guest houses of the European Planters in the neighbouring areas of Digboi. Calcutta Press reports on 19th April “...... This is a strange situation. When a city is siezed by enemies - the situation may be compared with that. European ladies and their children have been sent to Shillong and Dibrugarh ......... Meanwhile, all the meanial staff of the Europeans - the servants, sweepers, chaaprasis and the peons have joined the strike en masse.”68

The Daily Mail, London reported, “All European women and children have been

66 The Times, London, 19 April, 1939
67 The Statesman, 19 April, 1939
68 Ananda Bazar Patrika, 19 April, 1939.
sent from Digboi (Assam) following threats to their safety ....... Their removal to
neighbourhood towns were ordered by the Oil Company Manager Gurkha troops and
extra police are guarding Digboi. .... Native shopkeepers are supporting the dispute
by charging Europeans exhorbitant prices for food. Bread, for example, is 6d a loaf -
to white men".69 Interestingly, even a Burmese paper, *The New Light of Burma* wrote 
"Europeans are doing the work themselves with much difficulty in Digboi ..... no smoke
was noticed from the kitchens of the European officers of the Company, some of
them had to arrange food for themselves. The shops raised the prices of the goods
and bakers were prohibited from selling bread to the Europeans".70 The Governor of
Assam reports “The strike has been characterised by provocative language specially
against the Europeans. A boycott by domestic servants and bazar vendors of the
household of both the European and Indian (loyal) staff ..... compelled the ladies and
Children to leave Digboi”.71

Even the matter was raised in the British Parliament in the House of Commons
where the under Secretary to the Government of India have refuted the charge of
these papers that the town of Digboi is in a state of siege. In reply to the question of
Sir Nairne Stewart Sandeman, the Under Secretary for India, Col. Muirhead declared:
“I understand that in consequence of the strike a small number of Europeans and
Indians from among the staff are sleeping in the company’s hospital and a large number
messing there. The Governor, however, assures me that Europeans of Digboi are not
and never have been in a state of siege .........”72 Contradicting a news item published
in *The Daily Telegraph* and the subsequent enquiry from the Secretary of State for

71. Assam Governor’s situation report on Assam dt. 17 April, 1939, DO No 40 traced in MSS
India, the Governor of Assam wrote: "...... situation described in The Daily Telegraph incorrect ...... There is not and never has been any possibility of mass attack on Europeans. ......... Europeans were never been in state of siege ......... allegations regarding shopkeepers enforcing special tariff against Europeans was subsequently contradicted".73

The issues were deliberately fomented and blown out of proportion by the European Press - Capital nexus. The Finance Minister, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, with an intention to settle the issue, and particularly to defuse the tense situation (which resulted due to recruitment of new hands by the Company) requested the Police to prevent applications for seeking employment. This led to serious repercussions. As per Ahmed's instruction, the S.P., Lakhimpur wrote to the G.M., AOC, on 27 April 1939: "My instructions now are -

(1) To request any outsider who may come to Digboi in search of domestic service to refrain from seeking work with any AOC European employees.

(2) To request any labourers formerly temporarily employed by the AOC not to seek re-employment within the firm.

(3) To give protection to loyal workers both when at work and when proceeding to work.

(4) To request AOC employees who return from leave and to request men who were formerly employed by the AOC not to return to work or to seek re-employment with the Company.

To summarise the situation - the instructions conveyed in the D.C's letter dated

73. MSS. Eur.F 125/32. [Governor of Assam’s telegram to the Secretary of State from India dated 28 May, 1939.], OIOC, London.
24 are broadly speaking, intended to debar the employment of any person other than those who were in the service of the Company when the strike commenced.”

Flouting all norms of ethics and code of impartial journalism, *The Statesman*, in its editorial column dated 29 April 1939, termed the Government led by Bordoloi as a "criminal government". It wrote: “Incredible though it may appear, the Government has since issued written instructions to the police that they are to prevent applicants from seeking domestic service with the European employees and also to prevent labourers formerly temporarily employed by the AOC seeking re-employment. The word used in the order is ‘request’, but a request from the police must be obeyed...... But we are to think of a Government which orders the police to act as anarchists and agents of social revolution. We invite the attention of Mr. Subhash Chandra Bose and Mr. Gandhi to this as an urgent matter. It is clear that the Assam Government is not a government at all but a predatory junta. We hope for its own sake that the Congress High Command will send it packing at once. Otherwise there are no alternatives except action by the Governor or defensive action by the citizens. If the Governor calls for the resignation of these revolutionaries masquadering as ministers it is certain that the Indian Congress cannot range itself on their side. Why was there as yet seen no official report on the serious rioting which recently forced the military to open fire?”

Bordoloi contradicted the statement.* The Planters’ lobby lost no time to take up the issue at the highest quarter. So much was the pressure on the Government

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74. MSS. Eur. F. 125/32, Lord Linlithgow papers, OIOC, London
75. *The Statesman*, 29 April, 1939

* Bordoloi contacted the Editor, of *The Statesman* on 29 April and called on the Reporter to contradict the statement. The Reporter showed the copy of letter (from S P, Lakhimpur to G.M. AOC), to the Premier of which he had no knowledge. (See *The Statesman*, subsequent issues upto 14 May, 1939 for details on the subject)
from the Planters, Imperialist press and the other Capitalists enterprises that in the second half of May, the Bardoloi Government was forced to lift the ban on recruitment of outside labour. This withdrawal made the Capitalist-Imperialist Press nexus jublient and they now demanded the resignation of Finance Minister Fakhuruddin Ali Ahmed. "We did not know why F.A. Ahmed, the Finance Minister should be the minister handling the strike affairs in Assam and issuing instruction to the police. It was none of his business to give orders to the Police who take their instruction from his colleague, Mr. Bordoloi, who is not only the Premier but also the Minister in the Home Government, nor would the strike in the oil-fields seemed to be in any way, his direct concern".76 "...... We have now, however, elicited ..... that the Finance Minister's order of 23rd April have been withdrawn. We congratulate the Premier that he has given this relief to public opinion. It is clearly indicated that Mr. Ahmed should resign. He cannot hope to enjoy the confidence of the general public".77 These developments created ripples in the political circle and also in the Assam cabinet which compelled Premier Gopinath Bordoloi to issue the following statement in defence : "My attention has been drawn to the persistent attack that has been made by The Statesman to discredit our Finance Minister Mr. F.A. Ahmed. It has been suggested that he is acting without the authority or concurrence of the Cabinet. I take this opportunity to make clear that such inseminations are not only untrue but positively mischievous ......F.A. Ahmed was deputed by the Government to deal with Digboi situation. He had the necessary authority on behalf of the Cabinet ......he had our fullest support and concurrence".78

By the end of May, the Company recruited about 1000 new hands and with the help of these new recruits, the Company succeeded in resorting skeleton services.

76. The Statesman, Editorial, 13 May, 1939.
77. The Statesman, 17 May, 1939.
78. Ibid 21 May, 1939.
The Assam Oil Company was able to start refining again on 25th at which there were about 1200 new labourers. However, newspapers reported on the same day, "Work in the refinery and drilling is in standstill". The new hands, recruited from under-developed Assamese villages were coming from very poor economic background and they easily became the tools in the hands of the Company. They were kept confined within the AOC walled area, were not permitted to go out of the fenced boundary of the Company and were kept under strong police vigilance. The Union vehemently protested against this and in an appeal sent to all the important Trade Unions of India and circulated through the nationalist press appealed to bring about all-India pressure on the Company and the Government to end the deadlock. The appeal read, ".........Inspite of continuous and vigorous protests by the Union, the Company has been permitted as well as to create concentration camps within the expanded metal enclosure of the workshop and the refinery. The unemployed outside labourers are picked up from here and there and recruited from elsewhere and brought in the Concentration camp in the Company’s vanette under police and military escorts. In flagrant violation of all elementary rights of civil liberty they are kept there as virtual prisoners for 24 hours under strict military watch. The Concentration camp can be hardly distinguished from a prison house. Even the prisoners have contact with their near and dear relatives ......" There is no way whatsoever to ascertain at any time that each and every one who is kept there confined as virtual prisoners without any access to the public, has at all times even his so-called consent which is obtained by

81. AICC Papers. File on Digboi Strike. An Appeal by the Secretary, AOC Labour Union under heading “Abolition of Concentration Camp demanded”. Extract from statement by AOC, Secretary dated 22 May, 1939, NMML.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
questionable means and intimidation. None can illegally oppress anybody or violate elementary rights of individual liberty even by obtaining by some means verbal or written consent of the oppressed individual. Far less this can be legally permitted to practice in a mass scale, as is being done by the Company. Yet it is strange that the Government claims to preserve a strict neutrality........ nowhere within a lawful strike a concentration camp of this type has ever been allowed to break the strike in this way by police and military aid."84 The National Herald in a full page report on the subject, under the heading "Concentration Camps for Workers", stated that the Oil Company's new method to break strikes was unprecedented in the annals of labour disputes, which had never been permitted even in the days of bureaucratic regime in the provinces".85

All through the strike, a peculiar nexus was working against the labourers. The AOC management, the Planters and the local administration had the blessings of the Governor. The Governor had the blessings of the Viceroy and, therefore, they all combined together virtually to make a common front against the workers. This nexus was strengthened by the support of the imperialist press. Some confidential correspondence throws light on how this anti-labour nexus was operating. The Viceroy wrote to the Governor of Assam on 21 April, 1939, immediately after the firing: "You can rely on full support in dealing with the situation and in all developments ....."86 "You may be confident of full backing from me if your Prime-Minister raises difficulties".87 On the other hand, the provincial Governor confessed to the Viceroy, "Statesman's articles have greatly strengthened my position".88 The true

84. Ibid.
85. The National Herald, 28 May, 1939
86. File No. L/P & J/7/2560 [Telegram from the Viceroy to the Governor of Assam, traced in File L/P&J/7/2560] OIOC, London.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
character of the Capitalist - Imperialist nexus is revealed when we observe from a confidential correspondence (with Top Secret mark) that even the Conciliation Board was appointed after the acceptance and approval of the Company. The Governor of Assam, Twynam, wrote to Lord Linlithgow, "...... I had long discussion with Mr. Abraham from the London office of AOC and as a result, the Judge of the Assam Valley has been deputed to Digboi to act as a conciliator on terms of reference which were accepted by the Company on the understanding that the Congress President would make a personal appeal to the labour Union to cut off the strike. The essential condition was that the Company should not be called upon to discuss the new labour which has been engaged to carry on the Company's activities". On the question of the protection of the life and property of the Assam Oil Company's European officials, Linlithgow, the Governor-General of India seemed to be over-conscious. He wrote to the Governor of Assam, (looking at the remote possibility of the withdrawl of the strike) " that all safeguard should be taken for protection to European life and property. It is of course essential that both be adequately safeguarded and you may be confident of full backing from me if your Prime Minister raises difficulties over finding necessary police or, presses for reduction of police below level which you are satisfied is necessary minimum." 

The Company did not fail to apply all sorts of coercive measures. Along with forcible recruitment by the Company with help of the Police and military, the Company's medical services were now closed to all the striking workers. Numerous cases of assaults took place. Inspite of all these provocations, the morale of the

89. MSS. Eur. E278/5 Ried Papers, Do. No. 57., OIOC, London.
91. To cite a few instances, assaults on Mitharam Gogoi, Ramrup Hajam, Kamal Lahiri, Beni Madhav, Aka Das Ali, knocking down of Kalpanath by Hayman, assault on the volunteers by Tainsh, etc. Most of these assaults took place between 6 April and 27 June 1939 [For details, refer to M.N. Mukerjee and K.K. Hazra Reports]
strikers could not be broken. Coming on the brink of starvation, the strikers showed exemplary solidarity which received not only all India attention but also it attracted global working class attention. “Digboi is at present the scene of one of the most organised and powerful strikes conducted in this country”, stated Advance on 11 May, 1939. Even The Statesman, the greatest critic of the strike wrote: “The Strike appears to be exceptionally well-organised but the behaviours of the strikers are in no way aggressive”.92 Quoting a labour Union statement, Amrita Bazar Patrika wrote: “...... the working class and Trade Union in India should remember that the Digboi strike has assumed a supreme national importance and no other strike perhaps have evoked so much determined and united opposition of the entire vested interests, mainly alien, who are bent upon crushing this most remarkable strike that has struck terror into the hearts of the oppressive and vindictive oil employers, Tea Planters and their likes in its 100% solidarity, Hindu-Muslim and inter-provincial unity and equally determined fighting capacity......”93

By June, acting on the instruction of the Union, a good number of the strikers, left for their respective homes along with their families. In fact, this step was taken by the Union as an economy measure as the Union was extending some sort of relief to the striking workers like providing food, arranging medical treatment for the ailing strikers.94

The handling of the strike by the Assam ministry has been subjected to severe criticism. There was consistent demand from the Socialist camp that the ministry led by Bordoloi should take a more assertive role to compel the management to come to

92. The Statesman, 24 April 1939.
94. Advance, 7 June, 1939.
terms. "Since the middle of July 1939 Bardoloi’s leadership also came under fire from the rank and file of the Congress and he was accused as “indifferent Congressman” at whose hands “the prestige of the Congress was not safe. It was also alleged that he lacked firmness and had surrendered the cause of the Congress to the Europeans and officials and also to time-servers”. [The political turmoil that swept the state centering the strike is dealt separately in a subsequent chapter].

Bardoloi ministry was also severely criticised by the AOC Workers' Union for its failure to handle the situation. “......... failure on the part of the Assam ministry to give adequate protection to the workers against imperialist violence and powerlessness of the Government to force the hands of the Company to end the deadlock has raised an issue of first-rate political importance”, stated a communique of the Central Digboi Strike Relief Committee. His critics in the opposition bench of the Assembly blamed Bardoloi: “If the Assam Premier finds himself between two fires, he has to thank himself for it. One may feel pity for him. But he should have known that the assumption of the responsibility of running a government is not the same thing as roping in the Leftists with absurd promises” said the opposition leader, Sadullah.. In fact the Union’s grievances against Premier Bardoloi were many: they were sore because, in their own words, the Ministry had “meekly surrendered to the dictates of the company”. During his visit at Digboi on 13 April, 1939 Bardoloi publicly disapproved the continuous strike, Bardoloi’s statement that “the Union was not correct in inaugurating the Strike so early” made them upset; the 'blacklegs' employed by the Company were provided with armed police escort by the Government. There are reasons to believe that under tremendous capitalist pressure, the Government did not

96. The Statesman, 11 May, 1939, Statement by Syed Sadullah, the ex-Premier of Assam
dare to come into direct confrontation with the planters and the capitalist nexus. This was evident from the fact that when the AOC management refused to accept the recommendations of the Conciliation Board, the Ministry did not take any step inspite of AICC's specific directive to make the decision of the Board obligatory.97

Disillusioned at the role of the Congress ministry, the labour Union took up the issue with the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee and subsequently with All India Congress Committee. Records reveal that Subhas Chandra Bose wrote to Premier Bardoloi to withdraw military immediately from Digboi after the firing which the Premier refused flatly.98 M.N. Roy took up the issue very seriously in the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee. The Digboi labour strike, which was led by Pramanik, a socialist, was gradually getting frustrated at the passive role of moderate Congress leadership. His intercepted letter to J.N. Bhuyan, Jt. Secy. AOC Ltd. speaks his mind: "I am writing this letter from the train on my way to Jamshedpur from Kharagpur. I was to go to Patna to meet Dr. Rajendra Prasad according to the advice of Maulana Azad and Dr. B.C.Roy. But I thought, no useful purpose would be served by losing time in this way..... There is necessity of issuing a categorical statement clarifying the position of the Company and Union and what concrete steps congress should take under the circumstances..... It was the clear duty of the Congress President and the ministry to make a declaration to that affect and to give every possible support to the workers. It may seem incredible to those who do not know the inner politics of Congress today. That under the guidance of the Gandhi group, and the Parliamentary politicians like Gulab Bhai and Ballabh Bhai, Congress do not want to disturb the status quo in the Congress ministry governed Provinces or to take any action that may

97. Advance, 20 May 1939; Also AICC Papers, File on Digboi Strike, op cit [See a statement by S.Pramanik and J.N. Bhuyan regarding the rolr of the Ministry].
98. Secret CB 21 forwarded by Central Intelligence Office, Calcutta to DIG, CID, Assam, File no. C-6(A), 1939, SB.
precipitate a constitutional crisis............. Rashtrapati came to Calcutta twice and intervene not to save the Digboi labour..... so long the Congress President hassignally failed to give a nominal moral support to the workers' first cause...... we are leaving no stone unturned to bring upon the Congress and the ministry most effective pressure". 99

Some socialists in the Congress demanded Bardoloi's resignation from the leadership of the Assembly Congress party for his inept handling of the strike. Matters became complex when Bardoloi himself also threatened to resign. Interestingly, the imperialist press carried out the news that Bardoloi has actually resigned.* This put the ministry in delicate situation and later some socialists including Siddhinath Sarma denied that they requested Bardoloi to resign.100 Sadullah, Bardoloi's opponent in the Assembly remarked that the resignment was mainly due to the challenge from the Left-wing section of the Congress who were given a very long rope since the formation of the Congress Coalition ministry and who did not see eye to eye with the Government policies.101 No doubt it created a political turmoil and put the Congress Coalition ministry in an embarassing situation.102 It is worth mentioning that political

   * The Statesman reported on 10 May, 1939: "Nowgong (Assam) May 6 G.N. Bardoloi, P.M. of Assam submitted his resignation at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Assam Legislative Congress Party held at Shillong. The resignation has, however, been kept pending. This development, well informed circles believe, is due to difference of opinion between the heads of the Congress organisation in the province and Mr. Bardoloi over the question of Digboi labour strike."

102. APCC papers, File. Miscellaneous, 1939-42, Packet no. 27, which contains among other things a letter from Ballabh Bhai Patel to Bardoloi, Confidential note, the Secretary, Assam Assembly Congress Party to the Secretaries of the District Congress Committees
organisations like All India Forward Block, Congress Socialist Party.** All India Trade Union Congress showed active interest in the strike. Organisations from unexpected quarters like Anglo-Indian civil Liberties Association, Ceylonese Association of Calcutta, Jamailet-ul-Ullema, Ram Krishna Mission, trade unions from India and abroad extended their helping hand to the strikers. (For details see subsequent Chapters). At the same time the Central Congress leadership, though generally took a lukewarm attitude on the issue, now tried to bring about a settlement. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, J.B. Kripalini, Dr. P.C. Ghosh, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed all important Congressmen, held a series of discussions with the representatives of the Company and the Union during the month of June 1939.** The Company was represented by Langden and Moore. The minimum demands which the Union placed in these discussions were:

(a) all strikers should be taken back;

(b) workers dismissed during the pendency of the dispute be taken back and

(c) all outstanding points of the dispute be referred to and finally settled by the Board of Conciliation appointed by the Union.**

At the initiative of Sudhindra Pramanik, All India Congress Committee took up the issue. Subhas Chandra Bose and particularly M.N. Roy also put enormous pressure on the Congress working Committee to take a clear-cut decision in relation to Digboi

** Till then Assam was the only Province in India without any Provincial organisation of the Provincial Congress Socialist Party. The Digboi strike gave the socialists opportunity to organise themselves. The first session of the Assam Congress Socialist Party Conference was held in Jan. 1940 at Dergaon under the Presidentship of Somnath Lahiri. [Copy of the file in Linlithgow papers, op. cit., ; File no. B - 2(2) (e) 39(5B), Sriman Prafulla Goswami’s letter to Jaiprakash Narayan (intercepted letter)].

103. AICC papers: File on Digboi strike, op. cit., (Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s statement), Indian Annual Register (N.K. Mitra ed.), vol. 2 (July - December, 1939), pp. 206-8

104. Ibid
and urged to take specific resolution on the subject. Sudhindra Pramanik met almost all the leading Congress leaders and requested them to exert their personal influence, to resolve the impasse.\textsuperscript{105} Pramanik made fervent appeal to Congress President Rajendra Prasad to intervene in the matter.\textsuperscript{106} The All India Congress Committee in its four day long session held at Bombay during 24 to 27 June gave earnest considerations to the issues. Infact, a large number of members gave a notice to discuss the Digboi matters with priority. The working Committee resolution was moved by Dr. Bidhan Ch. Roy. The Digboi resolution regretted the decision of the Assam Oil Company not to refer "The question of the method and time of re-employment of the strikers" to a conciliation board to be appointed by the Government of Assam, and held that no corporation, however big and influential it might be, could be above public criticism or Government supervision or legislative control.\textsuperscript{107}

The resolution appealed to the Company to accept the suggestion of the Congress President for the settlement of the dispute, failing which the Congress advised the Assam Government to undertake legislation for making acceptance of the decision of Conciliation Boards, obligatory and to take steps to stop the renewal of the lease of the Company on its termination.\textsuperscript{108} The AICC also expressed its deep sympathy with the striking workers and criticised the Company for not submitting the issue before the Conciliation Board as per provisions of law.\textsuperscript{109}

Unfortunately, the recommendations of the Congress Working Committee did not receive any serious consideration from the Assam ministry. It is evidenced that

\begin{footnotesize}
105 AICC papers : File on Digboi strike, op. cit., NMML.
106 AICC Papers : Report to the Congress Working Committee on Digboi Strike at the Conference of Secretaries, June 1939 NMML.
107 AICC papers Bombay Session, 24-27 June, Proceedings of 27 June, 1939
108 Ibid
\end{footnotesize}
the European Lobby was perturbed by the AICC’s recommendations. The Governor of Assam stated: “I do not see at present any solution to the problems so long as Congress affords encouragement to labour agitation”.\footnote{File No. L/P&J/7/2580. Assam Governor’s Report. OIOC, London} Before the Congress Working Committee meeting the Governor was concerned who observed: “The intervention of the Congress President will be most unfortunate at this stage when the strike is on the verge of collapse”.\footnote{MSS. Eur. F 125/35, [H.J. Twynam’s letter to Lord Linlithgow dt. 16, 1939], OIOC, London} But they kept a close watch on the developments particularly among the rightist-socialist rift in the Congress. That AICC resolutions would have little impact on the whole scenario is evidenced from the following observation of T.J. Twynam in his letter to Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy: “That Resolution, in my opinion was singularly disingenuous and was framed by the working Committee as a sop to Leftist sympathisers in the All India Committee. The threats regarding the termination of the Company’s lease and the enforcement of term by legislation are, I have little doubt, quite illusory, and intended only to throw dust in the eyes of those who wanted a resolution in terms more definitely encouraging to the strikers …….”.\footnote{MSS. Eur. F 125/35 [Governor’s letter to Viceroy, DO No 51, 3 July, 1939], OIOC, London}

Meanwhile the continuance of the strike was causing so much loss and hardship to both the parties concerned - employers and employed, that the late Government felt that they ought not to postpone further attempts at settlement until the report of Sir Manmatha Nath Mukherjee was received. The Government, therefore, decided to appoint a Board of Conciliation, in order if possible to bring about a settlement. The Government first contacted Mr. Gulzari lal Nanda, a prominent trade Union leader and Parliamentary Secretary, Government of Bombay, to serve on the Conciliation Board which Sri Nanda turned down due of personal difficulties. Mr. K.K. Hajara, I.C.S, District and Sessions Judge, was therefore constituted a Board of Conciliation under Section 3 of the Trade Disputes Act, 1929 by Notification No. 4730-G.J of 26
July, 1939, and entered upon his task the same day.\textsuperscript{113}

The Company's efforts to crush the strike by all possible means continued. The Assam Oil Company and the Burmah Oil Company belonged to the same petroleum combine which was one of the biggest Capitalist enterprises in the East, having a very close link with the Government. The Company had a black record in its dealings with labour throughout India and Burma. It boasted of crushing the Budge-Budge strike in 1929 organised under the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose.\textsuperscript{114} It also dismissed and victimised many workers at Budge-Budge, Yenang-Yaung, Rangoon, Chittagaon, Madras and other places.\textsuperscript{115} But at Digboi, it met with organised and united resistance from the workers. After failing in all other methods to crush the strike, the Company began to recruit new hands. These recruitments continued even after the appointment of a Conciliation Board was consented to and was announced. On being questioned by the Conciliation Board as to why the Company was recruiting new men, the Company defended their stand as follows: “The Company has appointed new men -

(1) to keep running essential services, for example, electric light and sanitation.

(2) to fulfill our obligations as mining lessees by protecting “certain oil-wells making heavy water from suffering permanent damage. This work was carried out during the first two weeks of the strike by covenanted employees working 12 hours shifts”.

(3) “to assist in the resumption of normal operations”.\textsuperscript{116}

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\textsuperscript{113} Ib\textit{id}.
\textsuperscript{114} V.B.\text{ Karnik}, \textit{Strikes in India}, (Bombay, 1967), p 249
\textsuperscript{115} AICC Papers,File on Digboi Strike, \textit{op. cit.}, [See an appeal by Sudhindra Pramanik]
\textsuperscript{116} K.K. Hajra, \textit{Conciliation Board Report}, Company’s Communication dated 1 August 1939.
\end{flushleft}
This was the situation which the workers' Union was not ready to accept. By July-August, 1680 new men were recruited by the Company. Further, as against the pre-strike employment of 6,350 direct workers, the Company put its labour requirement now only to 5,560 (direct hands). Taking the opportunity of the strike, the Company, thus, abolished 700 posts, which became a new factor in the whole issue. The labour Union vehemently protested against this move as it was considered a deliberate move on the part of the Company to break the morale of the workers. At the intervention of the Board of Conciliation, the Company agreed to offer only one months' salary as ex-gratia payment to the men to be affected by staff-reduction on the termination of the strike. On Manager's request, the Conciliation Board communicated this to the workers who naturally refused to accept it. In fact the Board of Conciliation's efforts to bring an amicable settlement of the strike thus failed. However, the Board made two very significant recommendations as under:

1. All the strikers should be called back on termination of the strike, by discharging the new recruits. The cases of these new recruits may be considered by the Company in making appointments to future vacancies.

2. Any surplus over the requirements of the Company should be discharged, after a discussion of the question in the Works Council which should be formed immediately on termination of the strike. In discharging this surplus the usual principle of discharging the most junior men should be followed.

The Board regretted that though the labour Union wanted to take up the question of employment of Bungalow Servants and Contractor's men, it could not do so as that does not fall under the terms of Reference of and the Board.

117. Ibid.
118. Ibid.
119. Ibid.
However, the Conciliation Board failed to achieve anything significant due to the Company’s adamant attitude. His meetings with the Company management “clearly showed that there was no room for conciliation and amicable settlement for the strike”, on Hajara’s own admission.120

The Company appointed some men, mainly Sikhs, specifically to recruit labour to run the factory. These up country Sikh contractors (whose numbers were however small) warned the striking Sikh workers of the Company with dire consequences if they continued the strike. On the evening of 1 July a serious clash took place between the Sikh labour contractors and some strikers belonging to the Sikh community. Some Sikh employees including Sardar Ishwar Singh, a prominent member of the Sikh community who was on strike, were seriously injured. The Company however, refused admission of the injured workers in the Company hospital which infuriated the Strikers. This matter was referred to the Assam Ministry by Lakheswar Barua and R. K. Barua, members of the Legislative Council and the Ministry was urged to give specific instruction to the AOC management so that the injured are treated by the Company Doctors, particularly Surgeons in the AOC hospital at Digboi.121

Throughout the length and breadth of the country and in also in some foreign countries, numerous meetings were held sympathising with the strikers. During the months of April to August, meetings expressing solidarity with the striking workers were held at Gauhati, Dibrugarh, Silchar, Tezpur, Karimganj, Sunamgaanj, Nowgong, Lumding, Dhubri, Tinsukia, Margherita, Biswanath ghat, Ledo, Diphu, Calcutta, Budge-Budge, Kharagpur, Jamshedpur, Kanchrapara, Naihati, Lucknow, Kanpur, Nagpur, Bombay, Patna, Ahmedabad, Sholapur, Amber Nath, Bareilly, Chittagong, Sylhet, Dhaka.

120. Ibid.
121. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 3 July and 23 July, 1939.
Chandpur, Mymansing, Madras, Bhagalpur, Ceylon and also at Manchester, Birmingham and London by different forums - public, trade Unions and other organisations. In addition, thousands of sympathetic meetings were held regularly in the tea gardens of Assam where the workers were very much influenced by the strike (For detailed account see subsequent chapters).

The tremendous mass support that the strike received could be evidenced from the fact that in the complex political situation of 1939, people like Maulana Ablas Sohan Arifi, Vice-President of Jamailet-ul-Ullema came to Digboi and supported the workers' cause (inspite of Sadulla’s opposition) publicly. C. Gibbon, the President of Anglo-Indian Civil Liberty Association, personally came to Digboi and resorted to hunger strike from 24 June onwards to record his strong protest against the uncompromising attitude of the Company. Though Congress as an organisation practically failed to take any sort of concrete measures, except the Congress Working Committee resolution taken by the AICC at Bombay, individual Congressmen and left-nationalists raised their voice against the Company. M.N. Roy suggested that all Congress ministries in other Provinces should threaten to resign if the Congress ministry in Assam fails to compel to accept the most moderate condition of the workers. While Congress members like Sidhwa urged the nationalisation of the oil industry, Sibnath Banerjee urged boycott of petrol and other products of BOC Ltd. Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee was very vocal and the Central Digboi strike Relief Committee was organised at Calcutta with Hari Kumar Chakravarty as Secretary, Mrinal Kanti Bose as treasurer. Leading leftist and socialists like M.N. Roy, Somnath Lahiri, Sibnath Banerjee, Tulshi Charan Goswami, Dr. Dhirendra Nath Sen, Makhan Lal Sen, Mukundlal Sarkar, Rajani Mukherjee, AMA Zaman, Deven Sen, Bepin

122. Gibbon broke his hunger strike on 29 June after receiving the news of Congress Working Committee resolution on Digboi adopted at Bombay.
123 AICC papers, NMML, also Advance, 20 June, 1939.
Chakravarty and Nepal Bhattacharjee were also associated with the Committee. This Committee also issued ‘one anna coupon books’ for small collection in support of the Digboi strikers. They also sent their volunteers with sealed boxes to the industrial centres, in and around Calcutta, like Titabar, Naihati, Budge-Budge etc. and market areas of Calcutta like Bara bazar, Hatibagan, Shrimani market, for collection of relief materials and money in support of the strikers of Digboi.

Company’s pressure tactics on the workers to break their morale went unabated. They took a new method and served ejectment suits on 31 workers which, however, were dismissed, with cost to the defendants by Mr. Ashok Dutta, Munsiff of Dibrugarh. The Munsiff had stated that the services of the defendants had not been terminated because they struck work, that they were not licenses, but tenants and that proper notice had not been served by the plaintiff Company against the defendants strikes.

Side by side, with the help of new recruits, numbering about 1,300, the Company started its skeleton production. The Company even brought 67 skilled workers from Chittagong.

The role of All India Trade Union Congress in relation to the strike has not been satisfactory. It was only after the resolution taken by AICC at Bombay on 29 June that AITUC called its Working Committee meeting on 23 July at Nagpur and some resolutions about the strike was adopted. However, this meeting adopted resolution to observe 6 August as “All India Digboi Day” as the strike has assumed a supreme national importance.

125. Interview with Bepin Chakraborty. He stated that Mukund lal Sarkar, Vice-President of AITUC and other leftist leaders like Deven Sukul, Biswanath Mukherjee, and some others took part in fund collection.
127. AICC papers (NMML); also Advance, 5 Aug., 1939.
parts of Assam, Bengal, Lucknow, Jamshedpur, Nagpur, Bombay, this day was observed by organising protest rallies. Digboi witnessed an unprecedented mass rally. *Advance* reported: “All India Digboi Day was observed here on 6 August with great enthusiasm. 1500 people paraded the streets with band party from 8 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. Meeting started at Labour Union ground held at 12.30 P.M. Air was filled up with Slogans--like *Inkilab Zindabad Punjibad Barbad, Duniaka Mazdoor Ek Ho* - Traffic were at a standstill for four hours. Digboi never witnessed such a procession. Two minutes silence was observed as a mark of respect for the four striking labours who died (3 in firing). Oath of determination was taken”.¹²⁸

Unfortunately for the workers, the Second World War started and this global development gave a weapon in the hands of the central government which they were planning to utilise against the workers since long. Since the possibility of the war loomed large, the central Government, on the advice of the state Governor was contemplating to bring Digboi under the cover of Defence of India Rules which would automatically imply a ban on the strike. Mineral being a vital material for the war connected with the defence of the country and defence of the country being a Central subject, the provincial Governor suggested that the central Government should declare Digboi as protected area. It was a diplomatic step to sidetrack the Assam Ministry on the issue as that would have evoked the Ministry’s protests. The Governor of Assam wrote to the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow on 30 August, 1939: “......Possible difficulties are uncertain attitude of Congress ministry and tendency of Premier to procrastinate and refer the matter to Working Committee of Congress. There is also difficulty of maintaining secrecy if ministers have to be consulted and this is very important in view of strike situation. Digboi is a controversial party matter in Assam

¹²⁸ *Advance*, 11 Aug., 1939.
and its notification as protected by Provincial Government and consequent restrictive measure would only embarrass Ministry under Sec. 18(1)(C) of Draft X. It is for Central Government to make regulations for places containing ammunitions of war which include petroleum products according to Official Servants Act. This move should be concerted now and is less likely to arouse criticism if Digboi is protected for reasons of defence rather than public order which later is a provincial subject.129

To justify such a step, the Governor suggested that the Central Government should assume responsibility for the efficient prosecution of the war. Moreover, one must force up the realities and, the realities of the situation in the Province are:

(a) That the Ministry is not strong enough to take appropriate action at Digboi because of dependence on their left wing supporters (hence the disgruntlement of Chanda and the relief of six ministers who do not belong to the Congress party); and

(b) The strike itself was not a strike in the real sense as understood in England but was a movement held together only by the intimidation of the workers by a small gang of workers, of whom the most notorious was the Communist Pramanik.130

On 5 September, 1939, vide notification no. 21/114/39 - Political (w) - II. Digboi was declared as a protected area,131 with the result that no persons who was not a resident on 5 September, 1939 could be in this area without any permit. Notifications were issued between 5 September and 23 September (Notifications 232/OR/44/39, dated 9 September, 232/OR/6/39 of 14 September and 235/OR/39 of 22 September, 1939), exterminating strike leaders Mohammad Ahmed Chowdhury.

129. MSS/EUR/F. 125/32 OIOC. [Linlithgow correspondence with Governor of Assam, Jan to Dec. 1939], also File no. L/P&J/2580, Governor’s telegram, dt Shillong 30 Aug 1939
131. The Gazette of India Extraordinary, Delhi, 5 Sept., 1939.
Sandhu Singh, Mohammed Wafi, Aswini Kumar Chakravarty, Jagannath Upadhyaya, Syed Asgar Hussein, Mohammad Siddique, Amarnath Tewari from the area. As J.N. Bhuyan and Pritam Singh were not in Digboi at the time of declaration of the Ordinance, no such order were issued against them. Based on a telegram from the Deputy Commissioner, urging Pramanik’s immediate removal, the Governor passed an order to arrest him under Rule 129 and to deport him from the Province under DI Rule 132. Picketing, holding of meetings were also banned by the emergency proclamation - troops were immediately stationed to take protective duties and not to allow blockade, picketing and meetings etc. Naturally, now the morale of the workers were broken. But they exhibited an extra-ordinary solidarity in the face of the grave risk after the proclamation of DI Ordinance. The Company desperately wanted to have the skilled workers back and notified to that effect.

Still, none of the striking workers joined their work immediately after the proclamation of the Ordinance. Having failed in all their means to bring division among the workers in some other way, the Company now made a list of skilled and efficient workers (consisting some one thousand and five hundred names) and with the help of police and Assam Rifles, the Company Officials visited the workers’ lines to call them to resume their duties. “Their obvious objective was to isolate the bulk of the strikers in that way from a selected section of skilled workers whom they offered re-employment immediately, thereby creating division and demoralisation.

132. Ibid. 14 Sept. 1939.
133. File Nos. 68-70, Judicial and General Immigration B, June 1940.
   It is important to note that similar action was taken by Burma Government in January 1939 when Pramanik went there with the object of inciting the Syriam Oil workers to strike and that he and his companion, Jagannath Upadhyaya were not allowed to enter Burma.
135. AICC Papers, File on Digboi strike, op.cit.: Pramanik’s letter to the President, Indian National Congress, Wardha.
among the strikers”. But the workers did not join immediately in spite of such inducements. Pramanik, in a frantic appeal to AICC, reminded its members of their commitment and to resist firmly the “undue application of War Emergency measures” on the workers and to immediately implement AICC’s resolution “to forthwith undertake legislation for making the acceptance of the decision of the Conciliation Board implement AICC’s resolution”, “to forthwith undertake legislation for making the acceptance of the decision of the Conciliation Board obligatory”. The strikers now threatened hunger strike and Satyagraha against the imposition of Defence of India Ordinance and demanded in one voice that all the strikers including the contractors’ labourers and the bungalow servants must be taken back and all of them should be given their settlement dues within 48 hours. Many of the workers decided to leave Digboi on settlement of their dues.

The Labour Union now understood that they were losing grounds. The uncompromising attitude of the Company and “the unexpected and inexplicable dead silence on the part of the Government have created grave crisis amongst the strikers, whose patience, energy and purse have almost been exhausted on account of protracted but peaceful moral fight for the last five months”. Previously they planned indefinite Satyagraha from 10 September but, in the meantime, the emergency proclamation came. Finding no other way, on 7 September, the Union expressed their willingness to support the Government and extend wholehearted cooperation to the Government in war-time emergency and to suspend the strike. In separate telegrams to the Viceroy and the Governor-General, the General Secretary of the

136. Ibid. S. Pramanik’s statement after the promulgation of the Defence of India Ordinance - Also Pramanik’s appeal to the President of AICC, Wardha.
137. Ibid.
139. Extract from Resolution passed in the General Meeting of the Strikers held at Digboi on 30th August, 1939.
Labour Union stated: “Reference ordinance Digboi yesterday ten thousand Oil workers on legal strike over five months appreciate Government’s emergency measures for petroleum supplies request order Company restore status quo meaning take back all workers on conditions existed before strike and pay strike wages stop strikers prepared co-operate with Government at this juncture suspending strike during this emergency period differing other demands alternatively workers prepared leaving Digboi if all their dues paid immediately pray order company”. 140 In another telegram to the Premier, sent on 7 September, 1939 the labour Union Secretary, submitted: “Strikers humbly offer whole-hearted cooperation and loyalty to Government in this emergency (stop) Company adamant not taking all workers back (stop). Strikers therefore prepared leave station in utter helplessness (stop) Appeal kindly instruct company immediate settlement dues with service compensation or reinstate all strikers differing other demands”. 141

But the workers’ patience gradually began to wear out. Single-handed, they fought against tremendous capitalist exploitation for more than five months in a small town in eastern corner of the country, being isolated from the mainstream. They fought without salary, faced all sorts of oppression yet they did not budge to the management so long inspire of all sorts of threat, intimidation and cajolery. But their morale began to break when with the declaration of the war and the subsequent promulgation of Defence of India Ordinance, their leaders - the office bearers of the Union, some of the Union activists and the Secretary of the strike committee - were arrested. Secondly, due to the war the price-index shot up enormously and they found it impossible to

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140. AICC Papers, op.cit.; Also File No. Immigration B. 41/25 DO. NO. 327, Labour Union Secretary’s telegrams to the Premier, dt. 7 Sept, received on 8 Sept., 1939. ASA.
141. Ibid. [Some of the papers particularly in relation to S Pramanik’s Press Statements/Appeals in connection with the Digboi strike, which have been mentioned earlier would also be traced in Assam Pradesh Congress Committee papers, File No 4, Packet 6, Congress Bhavan, Guwahati]
continue without pay any more. Thirdly, as a result of the declaration of Emergency due to the War, the whole situation changed considerably. There was a psychological setback of the workers and they lost the morale courage to take further risks. As the time rolled on, some workers began to resume their duties. Some, being absolutely frustrated, left Digboi with their families. Thus ended the heroic struggle of the Assam Oil Company workers at Digboi and Tinsukia - which exhibited a classic example of working class consciousness and solidarity in the face of opposition from powerful British Press and Imperialist-capitalist nexus.