CHAPTER VII

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The Madras Presidency was industrially backward as compared to the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal. The Cotton Spinning and Weaving Mills and the Railways were the two largest employers of industrial working class in the Presidency. Heavy industries such as engineering works, coal, iron and steel or mining of any significance were not in existence.

With the growth of cotton textile industry, railways and other minor industries, there emerged a wage-earning class, that is the industrial working class. They constituted only a small percentage of the total population of the Madras Presidency. Unlike Bombay and Calcutta, where the labour force was recruited from far off places such as Bihar and the United Provinces, the Madras Presidency had its own labour force. Only a small fraction of the total work force came from outside the Presidency. The workers in the Madras Presidency was primarily an agriculturist or a labourer on the land. However a settled mill population was emerging. The
difficulty of finding an adequate livelihood in one's own village, poverty, increasing indebtedness and unemployment drove the agricultural workers to factories in search of employment. The workers were recruited from diverse castes and creeds and from surrounding villages.

The workers' working and living conditions were deplorable. They found the rigours of industrial work, brutal treatment by supervisors, frequent accidents, the exacting long hours of monotonous work unbearable. The low wages, insanitary housing, heavy fines, poor health and indebtedness further aggravated their miseries. The Government's efforts to introduce legislative measures to better the lot of the workers were inadequate and even these few legislations were not properly carried out by the bureaucracy and as a result the employers violated many of the provisions of the legislations. The workers did not wait for the formal birth of trade unions to improve their working and living conditions. Despite the fact that their working and living conditions were quite appalling and deplorable, they could not form a union of their own due to their weakness arising out of their illiteracy, ignorance, impecunious conditions, lack of leadership and insecurity of service. It, however, does not mean that there were no protest actions before
the formation of trade unions. The workers of the Madras Government Press, workers of the Coral Mills, the workshop workers of the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway struck work demanding an increase in wages, leave facilities and shorter working hours.

A combination of economic and political factors such as high prices, scarcity, steady deterioration in the working and living conditions during the First World War and the enthusiasm generated by the Russian Revolution of 1917 made the workers aware of the urgent need for labour organisations. The year 1918 witnessed the beginning of the organised labour movement in the Madras Presidency along modern lines. The Madras Labour Union was formed in April 1918 in the Madras City. It was meant exclusively for the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in the beginning; and soon it spread to other industries. Coupled with political motives, the Home Rule leaders provided leadership to workers. Even though the working and living conditions in the European-owned mills like the Madura Mills at Madurai and Buckingham and Carnatic Mills at Madras were better than those were in the Indian-owned Choolai Mills in Madras and in the Coimbatore Mills, the Home Rulers organised strikes in the European-owned Mills. Since it was a booming period
to the textile industry, the mill owners granted an increase in wages of workers. After the Amristar Session of the Indian National Congress in 1919 the Congress men began to evince interest in labour problems. The Indian National Congress provided the political background. They organised a few strikes in Madras and Madurai. The involvement of nationalist politicians in the labour movement added intensity and tended to increase the bitterness and hostility in the mind of the European mill owners, who victimised all the union members. The workers, eventhough waged militant struggles, achieved none of the demands.

From these setbacks, the labour movement started reviving from 1924 when the employers tried to pass the burden of trade crisis on the shoulders of the workers by way of wage cuts and retrenchments. As a result, the workers of the South Indian Railway, Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway, textile workers of Coimbatore, Madras, Madurai, Papanasam and other workers waged militant struggles against wage cuts and retrenchments. Here again the workers did not achieve any substantial gains. Most probably, it was owing to worldwide economic depression. However, after 1933, there was a revival in the labour movement. The recovery of the economy after the
depression, the constitutional reforms introduced by
the British Government and the revival of the leftist
forces under the leadership of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker,
P. Jeevanandam and Mukundalal Sirkar, were all responsible
for the revival of the labour movement.

Assumption of office by the Congress in July
1937 roused great hopes and expectations among the
industrial workers. The expectations resulted in the
sudden increase in the number of strikes. Workers from
almost all the industries launched militant struggles
demanding the removal of wages-cuts affected during
the years of trade depression, increase in wages and
improvement in their working and living conditions.
Viewing the seriousness of the strikes, the Government
formulated its labour policy on 22 October 1932. Based
upon its policy, the Government appointed Court of
Enquiries. The findings of the courts were merely
recommendatory and the Government was quite powerless
to have their own recommendations accepted and implemented
by the unwilling employers. The Congress Government,
like the pre - 1937 Government wanted to maintain law
and order at all costs, and as a result, it ruthlessly
suppressed the left-led strikers in the Mahalakshmi Mills
at Madurai and the Nellikuppam Sugar Factory. Even in
1939, there was hardly any improvement in the condition of workers of Coimbatore and other industrial centres except Madura Mills at Madurai. Here, the Government supported Varadarajulu Naidu, the Secretary of the Madura Labour Union. The Government pressurised the management of the Madura Mills to recognise the Madura Labour Union and the Papanasam Labour Union. The management utilised these unions to contain industrial unrest and militancy in Madurai and Papanasam. Dissatisfied with the leadership of Varadarajulu Naidu, a section of workers formed a union under the left leadership and organised strikes in the Mahalakshmi Mills, and the Madura Knitting Company. Eventhough, the workers' working and living conditions were inferior to those of the Madura Mills, the Congress Government owing to ideological differences suppressed the left-led strikes.

The outbreak of the Second World War opened a new chapter in the history of the working class movement in the Madras Presidency. The rise in the price of food grains and other essential commodities severely affected the industrial workers. The workers waged a number of militant struggles demanding dearness allowances, bonus, increase in wages to compensate the rise in the cost
of living. But the struggles ended in failure owing to the hostile and unsympathetic attitude of the managements and the Government. The Government of Madras also prohibited strikes and lock-outs under the Defence of India Rules in order to maintain the industrial production. Until Germany's attack on Soviet Union the communists condemned the war as 'imperialist war' and openly advocated revolution in order to overthrow the colonial power from India. But when Germany attacked Soviet Union in 1941, the stand of the communists in the Madras Presidency, underwent a change. The communist party of India considered the war as a 'people's war'. In accordance with this changed policy, the communists co-operated with the British War efforts. In 1942, the Indian National Congress launched the Quit India Movement. The working class, like other sections of the Society, actively participated in the movement. The Government ruthlessly suppressed the movement and imprisoned all the congress-minded trade union leaders and militant workers. In the absence of Congress trade union leaders, the communists strengthened their hold over the industrial workers.

The hardships that the working class underwent during the Second World War continued after the war.
In the Post-Second World War period, economic inflation hit the workers severely. The discontent of the workers that was bottled up during the war period burst out. As a result, the years 1946 and 1947 witnessed an unprecedented wave of strikes throughout the Madras Presidency. The formation of the Congress Ministry which had assured the labourers better treatment also encouraged them to strike work in order to better themselves. As in the case of the previous Congress period (1937-1939), the Congress Government under T. Prakasam appointed a number of Courts of Enquiry to settle the differences between the workers and the management. Eventhough, the courts recommended radical changes, the workers' condition did not improve much. The communists realised the economic distress of the workers, started preaching 'Class War' after the war and organised a number of strikes. The Congress Government considered these activities of the communists of detrimental to the interests of the labourers and adopted repressive measures against communist-sponsored strikes and tried to put down the agitations of the working class.

Even after the attainment of Independence, inflation, speculation and black marketing were rampant and caused great suffering to the industrial workers.
The working and living conditions did not improve much. As a result, the number of industrial disputes rose from 161 in 1948 to 288 in 1956. In most of the struggles, the leadership was provided by the leftist groups. Unlike the pre-Independence period, the Congress Government, which was in power established Industrial Tribunals, Boards of conciliation and adjudication under the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947. But the workers gained little out of these proceedings. The Congress Government considered the activities of the communist party as the greatest danger to India. Certainly the anti-communist stand of the Congress Government under O.P. Ramasamy Reddiar, P. Kumarasamy Raja, C. Rajagopalachari and K. Kamaraj Nadar from 1948 to 1956 weakened the communist movement as well as the labour movement in the Madras Presidency.

An analysis of the industrial disputes from 1939 to 1956 shows that most of the struggles arose over economic issues. They struggled for higher wages-dearness allowances and bonus. Some of the struggles were for the improvement in their working and living conditions. Several times, the workers struck work demanding reduction of working hours, better treatment from supervisory staff: security of service, abolition of excessive fines and
other facilities. The workers waged not only economic struggles, but also actively participated in the struggle for Indian Independence. The participation of the textile workers of Coimbatore and Madras in the Qu'ite India Movement of 1942 proved that they did not lag behind other sections of the society to overthrow the British Rule in India. The forms of protest, adopted by the labourers varied from petitioning to stoppage of work. Except the Burma Oil Company strike of 1927, South Indian Railway strike of 1928 and 1946, Pankaja Mills strike of 1942 and other left-led strikes between 1946 and 1948, all the other strikes were peaceful. Almost all the strikes during the period between 1939 and 1956 were isolated actions of the workers and they were confined to a particular factory. Only on a few occasions, the labourers waged general strikes. The working class also waged a number of sympathetic strikes.

The leadership was provided by the leaders of the Indian National Congress, Congress Socialist Party and Communist Party of India. Notable among them were W.P. Wadia, Thiru-Vi-ka, B. Shiva Rao, Selvapathī Chettiar, P. Varadarajulu Naidu, N.S. Ramaswamy Ayyangar, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Shiva, S.R. Varadaraju Naidu, N.G. Ramaswami Naidu, M. Singaravelu Chettiar,
Aukundalal Sirkar, P. Ramamurthi, P. Jeeyaram and S.C.C. Anthony Pillai. Their involvement in the working class movement was necessary from the beginning owing to lack of organisational skills among the workers, fear of victimisation for union activities and strong resistance from the employers. They were instrumental in giving practical shape to the needs and aspirations of the industrial workers. At the same time, the involvement of politicians led to the split in the rank and file and the leadership. It greatly weakened the bargaining power of the workers and the growth of healthy trade union movement. Taking advantage of the union rivalry, the employers played one caste against the other to weaken the trade union movement. The Union rivalry prevented the workers of one union from taking active part in a strike which was led by their rival union.

An important feature of the labour movement was that it was free from dissensions based on caste, creed and religion. There were occasions in which employers introduced caste and communal factors to break the solidarity of the workers. Several times, the employers tried to introduce caste and communal loyalties of the industrial workers but met with very little success.
The management followed consistently a hostile policy towards the unions. It viewed the labour organisation as mere creations of the ambitious political agitators. It victimised union activists by transfer or dismissal.

The Government's attitude towards labour was merely informed by the keeping the wheels moving. It viewed any form of labour agitation as law and order problem and prohibited labour meetings, processions, rallies and demonstrations under section 144 Criminal Procedure Code and other regulations by arresting the leaders. These adverse conditions retarded the growth of unions in the Madras Presidency. In times of struggles, the police force was mobilised into action in the name of keeping peace and protecting life and property. But they directly helped the employers to break the strikes. Some times, they even went to the extent of recruiting strike breakers to disintegrate the strikes. The colonial Government attempted to terrorize the working men with the help of the police force. The Congress Government adopted similar techniques to discipline the workers in times of crisis.

The leaders of the workers were treated as 'political suspects' and 'political agitators' and they
were under police surveillance. The leaders were arrested and imprisoned on several occasions for their trade union activities. Until 1920, every leader who organised the workers and represented their grievances was classified by the Government as 'dangerous'. From the late 1920 onwards especially when the communists involved in the working class movement the Government seriously encouraged the moderate labour union leaders in order to counteract the influence of the communists. This dual policy continued throughout the period under review.

The unions were factory-oriented. There was no single labour organisation embracing the workers of all factories at the Presidency level. Moreover, the workers did not put forward any radical programme meant for the entire masses of the Madras Presidency. The political experience of the working class was at its infancy. The strike movement was meant to achieve partition gains. Even the participation of the working class in the nationalist movement was not as the 'vanguard class' but as a 'sectional ally'. The strike movement did not initiate any radical action among the unorganised workers. So one can say that the working class did not play a 'hegemonic role' but only a 'subordinate role' in the polity and society of the Madras Presidency.
But the study of the working class movement indicates clearly that the consciousness of the workers was more than elementary. There was trade union consciousness. The struggle were not mere responses to the conditions within the factory premises alone. The workers looked beyond the factory premises also: they responded to the call of the nationalists. They were the willing allies of the national liberation movement. The struggles were for economic demands and for legislations to improve their lot within the existing social structure. Every struggle exposed the workers to the management and the Government. The strike movement was a hard school of experience for the workers. The workers realised that they had to struggle for progress. Both the Indian National Congress and the left wing politicised them to a certain extent. But the progress of politicisation was slow and partial. The whole period was marked by the absence of revolutionary class-consciousness. At best the workers emerged as a 'class-in-itself' but not as a 'class-for-itself'.