CHAPTER IV

WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR • 1939 – 1945
The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 opened a new chapter in the history of the working class movement in the Madras Presidency. The workers waged a number of militant struggles demanding dearness allowances, bonus, and increase in wages to compensate the rise in the cost of living. Moreover, the Indian Nationalist movement entered a new phase, launching the Quit India Movement in 1942. The working class, was mobilised by the nationalist leaders for the cause of nationalism. The workers too readily responded. 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 attempted to strengthen their hold over the industrial workers. All these aspects are discussed and analysed in detail in this Chapter.

The rise in price of food stuff and other essential commodities hit the industrial workers severely. Besides the workers experienced the hardship of non-payment of wages, delay in payments and arbitrary
deduction in wages.\textsuperscript{1} All the cotton spinning and weaving mills in the Madras Presidency, Railway Workshops, Crompton Engineering Company's workshop, Madras Port Trust Workshop and Ordinance Clothing Factory, engaged in war effort were granted exemption from the provisions relating to hours of employment under the Factories Act.\textsuperscript{2} The industries were geared to the war effort of the Government of India, thereby bringing untold miseries to the labourers in the form of overtime work, and illegal employment beyond specified hours.\textsuperscript{3}

Immediately after the Second World War, the Madras Labour Union, the South Indian Railway Labour Union; The Government Press Workers' Union; the Tobacco Workers' Union, the Burmah Oil Company Workers' Union; the Harbour and Port Workers' Union; the Nellikuppam Labour Union; the Coimbatore District Mill Workers' Union; and the Corporation workers' Union referred to

1. G.O. No. 2561, Public Works, November 21, 1940.
the abnormal rise in the price of food stuff and the need for giving the workers war allowances.\(^4\)

When the workers' demand for dearness allowance gained momentum Ganeshwar Aluminium Works, the Buckingham Carnatic Mills, the Madras Electric Tramway Company, Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway Company and the Madura Mills Company at Madurai came forward to grant liberal concessions.\(^5\) But all the employers did not respond positively to the demands of the workers. So the working class in the Madras Presidency embarked on a series of strikes.

In 1939, out of 31 strikes, 14 were successful, 5 were partially successful, 2 were in progress at the end of the year and the rest were unsuccessful. In 1940, out of 23 strikes, 3 were successful, 6 were partially successful and the remaining were unsuccessful. Out of 26 strikes which

4. Letter No. 174, Development, January 24, 1940; Letter No. 382, Development February 16, 1940; letter No. 856, development, April 17, 1940; Letter No. 1145, Development, May 16, 1940; Letter No. 1444, Development, June 19, 1940; Letter No. 1689, Development, July 22, 1940.

5. G.O. No. 2514, Public Works, November 8, 1940.
occurred in 1941, 4 were successful, 8 were partially successful, 11 were unsuccessful and in three cases the results were not known. There were 21 strikes in the year 1942 and of these 5 were successful, 5 were partially successful and eleven were unsuccessful. 6

It should be noted that until Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, the communists condemned the war as an imperialist war and advocated revolution in order to overthrow the British Rule in India. The communist party of India viewed that the task before the people was the revolutionary utilisation of the war crisis for the achievement of national freedom and called for the transformation of the imperialist war into a war of national liberation. 7 They also pointed out the futility of the workers participating in war which did not guarantee freedom in India. 8

6. Reports on the Administration of the police of the Madras Province, 1939, 40, 41, and 1942 (Madras, 1940, 41, 42 and 43).


Apprehending the danger of the communists propaganda to the war efforts, the Government of Madras decided to arrest them under the Defence of India Rules. The police imprisoned a number of communists. These arrests considerably reduced the activities of the communists on the trade union movement in the Madras Presidency. Even then, they tried to organise strikes focussing the long standing grievances of the Workers.

The Workers of the Aoran Spinning and Weaving Mills, Pappiniseri, near Cannanore went on a strike on 15 April 1940 over the question of dismissals and retrenchments. The management and the government dubbed the strike as political one and the government was not reluctant to engage the police against strikers. The labour leaders in Cannanore gave a call for one day sympathetic strike on 1 May 1940. This had immediate impact on the workers of the Common Wealth Trust Factory, Municipality and the Beedi factories. It was a short-lived affair. Though the workers gained little, the strike was a hard school of experience.

10. Fortnightly Report, May 3 and 17, 1940.
The Socialists also organised a strike of beedi workers in Madras on 6 May 1940, over the question of wages. On the introduction of the Tobacco Tax, these were reduced from 12 annas per 1000 beedies to 9½ annas. About 1000 men joined the strike and caused physical obstruction to non-striking workers. The police arrested 131 of them. The strike was called off on 8 May 1940, when the workers accepted the offer of 11 annas on the assurance that the managers' agents would not in practice reduce the wages still further as had been done before. The Government had ordered the remission of the sentences imposed on convicted strikers and the withdrawal of pending prosecutions.\textsuperscript{11} It was partial and militant to the extent of causing physical obstruction to the non-striking workers. This strike was of short duration. The workers were able to achieve certain concessions from the management and the government.

While the Communists organised strikes in Madras and other places in order to get some concession to the workers, the Congress-controlled Coimbatore Textile Workers' Union in Coimbatore organised a

\textsuperscript{11}. Fortnightly Report, May 17, 1940.
struggle against the management in order to get dearness allowance to the textile workers. The textile industry in Coimbatore after a period of depression before the outbreak of the war, slowly recovered and recorded a growth of unprecedented prosperity soon after the war. The Commissioner of Labour pointed out that an average mill in the Coimbatore with 12,000 spindles working two and a half shifts made a net profit of about Rs.2,500 per day or about Rs. 65,000 per month of twenty six days. But there was no appreciable increase in the level of wages of the workers. The workers decided to launch a direct action.

The Commissioner of Labour directed the mill owners to open co-operative stores and supply food stuffs to the workers at pre-war prices to the extent of sixty per cent of their wages. Various representatives of the Government, like the District Magistrate and the Commissioner of Labour made repeated appeals to the mill owners with regard to dearness allowance. The mill owners implemented the requests of the government partially and half-heartedly. So the workers had no other go but to resort to strike.

12. G.O.No. 2109, Public Works, August 29, 1941
13. Ibid.
On 5 July, 1941, the Textile Workers' Union issued notice to all the mill managements demanding thirty per cent dearness allowance in cash and it cautioned that if they did not comply with the request on or before 31 July, the workers would go on strike. At the request of the Union, the Commissioner of Labour advised the mill owners to increase the wages by 10 per cent and to give a bonus of one month's pay to each worker to be paid at the time of Deepavali and all the mill owners agreed to this, but the concession was not accepted by the workers in general. The executive committee of the Union decided to launch a general strike from 1 August if the mill owners failed to concede their demand for thirty per cent increase in pay with effect from 1 July 1941. The Government of Madras came to the conclusion that the workers' demands were unjust and the offer made by the mill owners was reasonable and advised the workers to accept that offer. If they refused to accept, the Government directed the District Magistrate to take steps to arrest the "deliberate mischief mongers" under the Defence of India Rules.

15. The Hindu, July 30, 1941.
Association also threatened to withdraw the prosperity bonus if the Union participated in the strike. ¹⁶

When the management refused to comply with their request, the workers in the thirteen mills struck work on 5 August 1941. By 7 August there was a complete strike in sixteen mills and partial strikes in seven mills. On the whole about 20,000 workers were involved in the strike. ¹⁷ Fearing complication, some managements initiated negotiations with the union and agreed to give ten per cent dearness allowance from 1 January 1941. ¹⁸ It is to be noted that the mill owners who refused to grant dearness allowance from 1 April 1941 came down to grant it with effect from 1 January 1941. Failing to attract the workers to their side, the Mill Owners' Association on 10 August threatened to declare a lock-out of all the mills if the workers did not turn up for work before 13 August on terms settled by the Commissioner of Labour. They harassed the residents of mill colonies to rejoin work or face eviction from the quarters. ¹⁹ On

¹⁷. Fortnightly Report, August 18, 1941; The Hindu, August 6 and 12, 1941.
¹⁹. Ibid.
the other hand, the strikers picketed the non-working workers vigorously in the neighbourhood of the mills and particularly in villages where they lived. The Government acted quickly and on 20 August, the District Magistrate of Coimbatore, issued a ban order prohibiting meetings and processions within two furlongs from any of the mills and picketing within a distance of four furlongs. A similar order was issued by the sub-Magistrate, Palladam, in respect of Combodia and the Kasthuri Mills. 20 Those orders produced the expected results. The workers began to go back to the mill despite the strenuous efforts of the leaders and in order to solve the problem, the leaders called off the strike. The employers agreed to pay a dearness allowance at 12.5 per cent from 1 July 1941 and a bonus of one month's wage from 1941 to be paid on 1 September of each year. 21

The mill owners decided to curb the activities of the Textile Workers' Union and its leaders. They did not reinstate about 1,300 workers who took part in the previous strike. 22 The Mill Owners' Association

20. Ibid.
22. Fortnightly Report, September 21, 1941.
blamed the textile workers' union for the hardships of the jobless workers. The District Magistrate feared that the attitude of the mill owners would precipitate further crisis. However, the mill owners agreed to reinstate the strikers, provided the union expelled the executive committee members who organised the strike. Though the Textile Workers' Union agreed to this condition only to secure employment to the victimized workers, the mill owners refused to reinstate about 120 militant strikers.23 Thus, the struggle of the workers for economic betterment ended in complete failure because of the adamant stand of the mill owners and the recalcitrant attitude of the Government.

The strike movement was not confined to the textile mill workers alone. On 14 June 1940, the Madras Motor Drivers' Association passed a resolution setting forth eighteen demands which they wanted the management of the city and suburban motor bus companies to concede; failing which, they threatened a strike on 27 December 1940. The main demands were the recognition of the union, increase in wages, observation of the Motor Vehicles Act by the bus owners, extra wages for

23. G.O.No. 2302, Public Works, October 17, 1941.
charcoal bus workers, stopping of collecting excessive fines, fifteen days casual and fifteen days sick leave, confirmation of service, bonus, provident fund, dearness allowance and the reinstatement of the dismissed drivers and conductors. The representatives of both the parties met the Deputy Commissioner of police and an agreement was arrived at, according to which some of the minor demands of the workers were conceded while other major demands involving financial commitments were left to the decision of the official arbitrator, appointed on 20 January, 1941.

The Madras city and suburban Bus Companies Association agreed to give a minimum pay Rs. 36 per month to motor drivers who had put in two years or more continuous service on 1 May 1941 and Rs. 35 to other drivers. In turn, drivers had to work for a maximum period of 54 hours and no driver was allowed to work consecutively for more than 13 days without a holiday for a whole day. Regarding the pay of conductors, the Association agreed to pay a minimum monthly salary calculated at 12 annas per duty of not more than 9 hours. The Association also agreed to confirm the drivers and conductors. It also acceded to grant six

24. G.O.No. 164, Public Works, January 20, 1941
25. Ibid.
days leave (casual or sick) with pay for each year of continuous service subject to the exigencies of service.26

Despite the repeated advice of the Commissioner of labour, the bus owners failed to implement the recommendations. The Madras Motor Drivers' Association threatened to go on strike from 13 June 1941 unless their demands were conceded. The Indian Express after dwelling at length about the hardships of the workers justified the demands of the workers.27 On 10 June, N. Sundaram Iyer, Managing Director of the City Motor Service Ltd. and the Public Passenger Service Ltd. controlling 117 out of the total of 184 buses plying in the Madras City, secretly negotiated with the union that he would grant a concession of three days off instead of two days as originally agreed to and that the union should advise the workers not to strike work as contemplated by the union. In the mean time, the management victimised a number of drivers and conductors. As a result, on 4 July 1941, the drivers and conductors struck work.28 Following the refusal of the bus owners to accept the

26. G.O.No. 2867, Public Works, November 25, 1941
27. Indian Express, June 11, 1941.
28. G.O.No. 2867, Public Works, November 25, 1941
advice of the Government, there had been increased activity on the part of the motor workers, and on the part of passengers' Association and other labour organisation. The strikers organised processions every day. There had been some picketing of buses leaving their sheds and passengers associations held a number of meetings criticising Government and formed a relief committee to give financial assistance to the strikers. Other unions in Madras also held meetings to express their sympathy with the strikers. 29 P.R.K. Sarma, the Labour Leader, took up the cause of the strikers and assured them that a general strike under the auspices of the Provincial Trade Union Congress in their support would be launched. The Government concluded that both parties were as fault, the workers embarking on a lightning strike without notice, the employers by their failure to implement the terms of the award and the subsequent agreement. 30 The Indian Express in its issue on 24 December 1941 wrote, "In no other strike has the government been made to look so powerless to enforce its advice". 31

29. Ibid.
30. G.O.No. 2867, Public Works, November 25, 1941.
31. Indian Express, December 24, 1941.
The strike continued without any change. Following a deputation of the Provincial Trade Union Congress, the Government suggested the appointment of a High Court Judge as arbitrator. On 25 November 1941, the Government appointed Justice Burn, as an arbitrator to settle the dispute. On 12 April 1942, the arbitrator submitted his findings. The Government observed that the findings of the arbitrator on the specific allegations of breaches of the Commissioner of Labour's Award made by the Union were generally in favour of the bus owners, except in regard to the payment of Re. 1 a month to conductors in addition to their duty wages, washing allowance and grant of a day's off. According to the arbitrator, "these were not the sufficient grounds for going on strike without further reference to the Commissioner of Labour or attempts at negotiation." Accepting the findings of the arbitrator, the Government decided to take no further part in the dispute beyond directing the commissioner of Labour to see that the owners implement his award in regard to the Re. 1 payment to conductors, washing allowance and to frame a clear workable scheme of day off that should be in accordance with his award. 32

32. G.O.No. 2867, Public Works, November 25, 1941
The workers waged a number of militant struggles demanding dearness allowances, increase in wages and improvements in their working and living conditions. The leadership was provided by both the communists and the Congress leaders. The managements and the government ruthlessly suppressed the working class movement in order to increase the war production.

There was a change in the attitude of the communists towards the British involvement in the Second World War. They decided to co-operate with the British War efforts. But the Indian National Congress acted the other way round. On 8 August 1942, the All India Congress Committee demanded the immediate withdrawal of British power from India and started Civil disobedient movement. The Congress leaders thought that the war was their final struggle against the British government and all the sections of the society including industrial workers were called upon to join the movement. The arrest of the Congress leaders followed. The news of the arrest of the leaders spread throughout India with a lightning speed and the fury of the masses knew no bounds. The Quit India ignited great

enthusiasm among the industrial workers. Though their grievances were basically economic they were spurred on to action by the inspiring leaders of the Indian National Congress. The strike movement took an aggressive turn.

A letter written by S. Radhakrishnan, Vice Chancellor of Benaras Hindu University, to the Marquess of Linlithgow, Viceroy, Governor and Crown Representative on 8 August 1942 reads:

"... on account of high prices and scarcity of food stuff there is an increasing and widely felt poverty in the land. Apart from a very small percentage of people who are able to live in comfort in spite of all these hard conditions, the very large majority are suffering from acute difficulties and hunger is a great revolutionary force. If the movement is actually launched it will spread like wildfire in spite of the attempts of the Government and will give rise to riots, lootings and bloodshed, etc."

34. Ibid., pp. 626-28
The above statement holds good in the case of Madras City and Coimbatore.

In Madras, the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills were restive since the beginning of January 1942. The cause was due to indebtedness of the workers. The Sowcars issued a notice to the effect that all pledged things should be redeemed by 15 March 1942 or they would be sold. Most of the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, had loans on pledge of jewels and they wanted to redeem them. The workers demanded an advance of wages to enable them to vacate their families in view of the increasing scare in the city owing to the war, but in vain. They, then demanded the half-yearly bonus. The fall of Singapore provided the union and its members with an additional impetus for the agitation when the management refused to comply with their request, the workers in the spinning and carding sections of the Carnatic Mills struck work on 19 February 1942. The following day, the workers in the warehouse section of the Buckingham Mills downed tools and resumed duty on 21 February 1942. 35

35. G.O.No. 720, Public Works (L) (Conf.), March 9, 1942
A tense situation continued and on 9 March 1942, the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills staged a stay-in-strike as a protest against the action of the management in cutting their pay for the days on which they were on strike in February 1942. Speaking before the striking workers, Selvapathı Chettiar and other union leaders advised the workers to resume work since the strike was launched without the consent of the Union. On 11 March, the management re-opened the mills with the help of the police. It issued instructions to the workers that they should peacefully return to work before 12.30 p.m. and it would not pay the wages for the strike period. Although, the union instructed the workers to resume work unconditionally, the strikers did not listen to it. When the strikers started attacking the police, the police opened fire on the workers in which nine persons died and many were injured. The Commissioner of Police banned meetings and processions under the Defence of India Rules.36

The closure of the Mill since 11 March caused untold miseries among the working class due to

36. The Hindu, March 13, 1942; G.O.No. 1130, Public (Conf.), April 8, 1942.
unemployment problem. The impecunious condition of the workers compelled them to take the initiative to open the mills. Memorandums were sent to the government by the labour union involving the Government in reopening the mill. In addition to that Chakkarai Chettiar, T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, G.Selvapathi Chettiar, and G.Ramanujulu Naidu met the Governor on 21 March 1942 and insisted him for reopening the mill. The union and the public insisted the management of the mill on giving compensation to the families of the victims of the police firing. The Madras Labour Union urged the management to pay the workers. The Government and the management of the mill also were not in a position to prolong the closure of the mill, because the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills Textile Production was one of the important output of textile materials which could be supplied for the soldiers fighting the Second World War. Hence, the management re-opened the mill on 6 April 1942 by giving some promises to the workers.

Peace did not last long. Trouble started again in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill due to salary

38. The Hindu, April 7, 1942.
and other matters. The workers were not satisfied with the existing wage system and they wanted to get more salary and bonus. In addition to that the management did not show any sympathy towards the families of the deceased in the March firing incident, when the payment of the half yearly bonus was made for five months only i.e. the closure period was excluded and at the rate of 10 per cent instead of 12-½ per cent was made in February. The representatives of the welfare committee approached the manager and said that the workers were not content with extra bonus announced by the management and the workers demanded an increase in dearness allowances, grant of annual increments, employment of half timers as before, compensation to the families of those killed in the police firing in March, and the release of strike leaders. 39

T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, P. Varadarajulu Naidu, V. Chakkaai Chettiar and Selvapathi Chettiar pleaded with the Government to give pecuniary help to the families of the deceased and those injured. Chakkari Chettiar in a letter to Strathie, Adviser to

the Government, pointed out that such a gesture would have a steadying effect and would contribute not a little to keep them contended and adhere to constitutionalism.

But the Government declined to give any compensation to the victims. As a result, the workers actively took part in the Quit India Movement. On 22 August, a section of the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills Stopped work, but resumed duty immediately. On 24 August the workers of the spinning and carding department of the same mills staged a stay-in-strike on the question of pay for the period of the previous strike and increased bonus and dearness allowance. On the following day, all the workers in the Mills joined the stay-in-strike. The management declared a lock-out on the same day. It put up a notice stating that the mills would not be opened until the workers expressed their willingness to resume work. The strike continued and on 18 September the management put up a notice dismissing fifty one workers who took

40. G.O. No. 2858, Public Works (L) (Conf.), August 11, 1942.
active part in the strike. However, the economic hardship forced the workers to return to duty on 21 September 1942. 41

The strike movement in the textile mills was sporadic; in some cases it was spontaneous. The leaders were merely interventionists. Though the Quit India Movement was on, the Congress leaders advocated constitutional path for the workers. But the workers contended the technique of direct action. It was failure of leadership to heighten the political consciousness of the workers in the hour of nationalist agitation. However the movement, inspite of leadership, added strength to the workers.

The workers in other industries did not lag behind the textile workers in the city of Madras. The workers of the Public Works Department Workshop staged a stay-in-strike on 28 August 1942. On the same day, the workers of the Madras Port Trust, Binny's Beach Engineering works and the Madras Electric Tramway and

Supply Corporation also agitated for an increase in dearness allowance. The very same day, the scavengers of the Corporation of Madras petitioned for an increase in the dearness allowance and threatened to go on strike. When the commissioner of the Corporation of Madras refused to grant any concession the scavengers stopped work on 1 September, but the strike was called off when the commissioner announced the increase in the wages of the scavengers. The workers of the Ajax Products Limited, Madras, struck work on 19 September on the question of inadequate dearness allowance. They however, resumed to work on 24 September on the promise of the company to consider the question of increasing the dearness allowance and to open a provision store for them. 42

The worst affected area was Coimbatore where the working class took active part in the movement. The working condition of the Coimbatore Textile Workers were not satisfactory even before the Second World War. On 5 June 1942, the governing body of the Coimbatore

42. G.O. No. 283, Public Works, February 12, 1943.
District Textile Workers' Union resolved that in view of the fact that owing to the exorbitant increase in the prices of foodstuffs, the condition of the mill workers had become intolerably bad as it had considerably affected their families and thus made them run into heavy debts. The union requested the mill owners to come to the rescue of the workers, by granting six months salary as bonus and 50 per cent allowance with effect from 1 June 1942, as the union felt that the grant of dearness allowance during the previous year after the general strike was quite inadequate. But the mill owners refused to give any concession to the workers.

On 8 August 1942, the Southern India Mill Owners' Association warned in their letter to the District Magistrate of Coimbatore that industrial unrest might spread and overwhelm them. They opined that it was not at all designed, to advance the cause of labour but directed towards political ends. The labour leaders were carrying on political propaganda among the factory workers. It was brought to the

43. Letter No. 2742, Public Works, August 3, 1942
notice of the government by the mill owners. To them the union wrote it was "rowdism, malicious preachings and incitement". The mill owners had to meet the growing demand for yarn and cloth, of the government and the public.44

It was at this juncture, the leaders of the Congress were arrested. Following the arrest of the leaders, the Quit India Movement gained momentum in Coimbatore too. On 9 August 1942, protest meetings were held in Coimbatore. On 12 August 1942, prominent trade union leaders of Coimbatore and leading Congressmen met at Ondiputhur to decide the future course of action. In this meeting, it was evident that they advocated the use of violence and inspired the textile workers to resort to strike. The industrial climate was conducive to the workers’ action. As a result, on 13 August, the workers of eleven mills in Coimbatore and three mills in Udumalpet struck work.45

44. G.O. No. 3470, Public Works (L) (Conf.), September 25, 1942.

Owners association opined, that the present strike in the group of mills in the Singanallur area, was an unlawful one as there was no advance notice to them. It viewed that the Coimbatore District Textile Workers union was fully responsible for fomenting the strike and the Association resolved to request the District Magistrate to take the necessary action against the union leaders and it declared the union an unlawful body. Crombines, the District Magistrate of Coimbatore, examined the question of the "illegality of these strikes" and decided that "they were not connected with any trade dispute". As the strike was in furthering off a political movement and not of a trade dispute, the District Magistrate refused to apply rule 81-A of the Defence of India Rules. However, the police at once arrested N.G. Ramaswami Naidu and few others and banned meetings and processions at Coimbatore, Tiruppur and Udupalpet.

46. G.O. No. 3476, Public Works (L) (Conf), September 25, 1942.
The arrest of leaders was the signal for the violent outbreak and on 14 August, a supply special train containing 25 Ibs shells was derailed near Singanallur. Damage to the extent of about Rs.80,000 was caused. The police estimated that about 100 persons were involved in the offence and the persons involved were "almost certainly all mill workers on strike along with unemmployed hooligans" from the Singanallur area and among whom the workers of the Vasantha Mills were largely responsible.48 There was a lull in activities for few days except for strikes in schools, the defying the ban on meetings and the cutting of telegraph wires, tampering with the railway line and so on. On 19 August, 1942 leading men were arrested—and therefore, there was practically no activity upto 22 August 1942.19

As already pointed out, taking advantage of the war, the mill owners reaped huge profits. Prices had been risen considerably high and the labourers were struggling to eke out their livelihood with their scanty Wages. It was, therefore natural for the workers to demand

49. The Hindu, August 22, 1942.
bonus and - of the Pankaja Mills demanded twenty five per increase in wages, twenty five per cent war allow - six months wages as bonus, but all in vain. 22 August, all workers including 500 women staged a on-strike with a view to pressing their demands which resulted in lathi charge and firing by the police. Two persons were killed and several injured.

On 24 August the workers in ten mills in Singanallur and Ondipur went on strike, to show their sympathy with the workers of the Pankaja Mills. They also pressed for the reimbursement of three months wages as bonus. 27 August, the workers of the Jayalakshmi Mills at also struck work. This brought the number of mills on strike to eleven inclusive of the Pankaja Mills in which there was shooting.

As in the same group of mills again went on s the District Magistrate promulgated an order under 31-A of the Defence of India Rules declaring the strike as "illegal". If the workers failed to resume duty at 7 a.m. on 26 August the District Magistrate threatened that they had to pay the penalty under the Defence of India Rules. Though pasted at the gate

51. Ibid.
of all the mills, the notice did not produce the expected result and the workers of only one mill resumed duty. As it was impossible to prosecute a large body of workers, the District Magistrate sought the help of owners of the affected mills to arrest the ring leaders whom they considered mostly responsible for the strike. The mill owners imposed six days fine of pay on all workers under the Trade Disputes Act of 1929, in addition to the ordinary loss of wages.\textsuperscript{52}

This attempt also failed owing to the lack of unity among the mill owners. The owner of the Kamal Mills was even prepared to sanction an enhanced bonus. When the owner of the Jayalakshmi Mills offered "inducements" to the workers, they returned to work.\textsuperscript{53} Taking advantage of this disunity, the workers pressed for their demand of three months' wages as bonus.

As the District Magistrate viewed that the "illegal" strike was "definitely not a matter for conciliation or adjudication". He let the strike run till the workers reached a proper frame of mind through loss of

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid
pay and fines, even if the war work was affected, rather than to have the threat of more strikes." As the mill owners had already earned sufficient profit, they were not affected by the closure of the mills and therefore, their only desire was to teach a lesson to the workers not to repeat their misconduct in future. On 26 August 1942, the mill owners met the District Magistrate and argued that the strikers could be brought to their senses only by taking deterrent action.

They suggested the measures - action against a few mill workers, and union officials, arrest and detention of those persons other than the union officials, declaration of the Coimbatore District Textile Workers' Union as an unlawful assembly, a free hand for the mill owners in the matters of reinstatement of rebellious workers and of granting bonus, wage-cut for the striking days, and posting of additional police forces in the strike - hit areas were to be implemented. 54

According to the conciliation officer, all these measures were right and lawful. The strikers did not

54. Ibid.
rush to any settlement or putforward their grievances in a constitutional manner. On 27 August, 1942, the conciliation officer wrote that the strikers would not join the mills unless the organisation at the back of the strike was thoroughly handled and the offenders booked.  

In the mean time, the strikers resorted to violence. On 24 August, the strikers burnt several toddy shops at Singannallur, Irugur and Pallapalayam. On the night of 26 August, a mob of about 150 persons went to the Sulus Aerodrome and set fire to the thatched sheds gutted twenty two lorries and set to 100 gallons of petrol to flame. Three of the lorry personnel were burnt to death. It was estimated that damage to the extent of about Rs. 1,10,000 was caused. Police investigation showed that mill workers on strike from the mills of Singanallur and neighbourhood along with unemployed people comprised practically the whole of the mob. Almost all the males of the nearby villages were arrested and kept in prison.  

55. Ibid.  
The strike movement was violent. But the violence was not a planned strategy of the workers. It was more in the nature of a response to the high-handed activities of the mill owners. The management resorted to repressive measures; the Government was a willing partner in the act of coercion. The workers had no other go but to resort to violence. A notable feature of the strike movement was the involvement of the Public in favour of the strikers.

The communists did not identify themselves with the Congress in the Quit India Movement. At the same time they worked hard to increase their influence among the workers. The Communist Party of India declared the Congress Satyagraha an "inopportune and harmful to the cause of Indian Independence at the present time." P.C. Joshi said, "we communists firmly believe that the lead for struggle given by the working committee was not the path of national struggle but of national suicide." The party stated that to call upon workers to go on political strike was not to exert pressure upon the British Government but to disrupt the country's advance

58. Ibid., p. 379.
and starve the workers for nothing. While addressing the sixth labour conference at Golden Rock on 16 August 1942, the Communists like P. Ramamurthi, Parvathi Kumaramangalam and others advised the workers not to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement and deplored the violent acts done in furtherance of the movement. In Coimbatore, the Communist controlled Coimbatore Mill Workers Union held three meetings in August 1942, at which the speakers condemned the Quit India Movement. In Coimbatore, all the Congress minded trade union leaders and militant workers were arrested. The Government advised the strikers to call off the strike and resume work in "an orderly way and prepare for an organised, disciplined and constitutional struggle for the enforcement of their demands." The District Magistrate also requested the management of these mills not to take any action against the strikers except on those who were convicted in a court of law for a criminal offence. The workers in all the mills except Pankaja Mills returned for duty on 1 September and Pankaja Mills started working by the second week of September 1942. Soon after resuming of the normal work in the mill collective fines were imposed. But

60. G.O.No. 3476, Public Works, (L) (Conf.), September 25, 1942; Janasakthi, October 14, 1942.
certain classes of persons like supervisors and mill staff, Indian Christians, Adi-Dravidas except Pallars, village officers and civic guards were exempted from the payment of fine; women were not excluded from the imposition of the fine though they did not take part in the strike. The District Magistrate argued that they "must have had knowledge about it and they ought to have been in a position to use their influence to avert the sabotage." The District officials expected a strike in the event of the imposition of such a fine on mill workers; but owing to the arrest of many of the Congress, minded trade union leaders and worker level leaders, no strike took place.

The Quit India Movement gave free access to the members of the Communist Party to enlist as many workers as possible to their fold. P. Ramamurthi, a Communist leader urged the mill owners of Coimbatore to withdraw the prosecutions launched against workers and the Government to intervene in the dispute between the workers and the management on the question of prosperity bonus. The mill owners' association, as a gesture

of concession, sanctioned dearness allowance of certain percentage with reference to the cost of living index to the workers who had not struck work. The executive committee of the mill workers union welcomed the sliding scale of dearness allowance and expressed the view that it was inadequate and that any scale of dearness allowance agreed upon should be given with retrospective effect from September 1939, if not, at least from June 1941. The committee also demanded six months wages as bonus and argued that this demand was warranted by the financial position of the mills and the bonus was necessary to liquidate debts incurred by workers during the last three years owing to non-payment of adequate dearness allowance. The committee added that if these "most reasonable" demand were not met within a week, they would be compelled to advice the workers to go on a strike to achieve their demands. But their policy of Peoples' War prevented them from taking direct action and these demands were never pressed.

But the workers of the Madura Mills at Madurai and Papanasam had not shown any interest towards the congress movement. It should be noted that the management

62. The Hindu, September 2 and 5, 1942.
of the Madura Mills, which opposed any form of trade union activity prior to 1937 with the emergence of the left and the assumption of office by Congress, found that it would be mutually rewarding to work with moderate trade union leaders like S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu. The management, therefore, recognised the Madura Labour Union at Madurai and the Papanasam Labour Union at Papanasam the unions began to function more as a "management union." The management introduced several welfare measures in the co-operative stores, Harveypatti housing colony, recruitment of workers through unions, workers savings fund, pensions and gratuity with the co-operation of the unions to improve the condition of workers and to contain industrial unrest. As a result, as Eamon Murphy points out, S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu" regularly sang praises of the British counselled 'Moderation', discipline and loyalty to the management." When the Congress launched the Quit India Movement, S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu, once a staunch support of Congress advised the workers not to participate in the Movement. As a result,


65. Letter No. 3564, Public Works, October 1, 1942
the workers at Madurai and Papanasam did not take any part in the movement. As the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras presidency pointed out, the advice of S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu had the desired effect. 66

The Communists played caste and communal politics in Madurai with the object of undermining the influence of Varadarajulu Naidu among the workers and of strengthening their position in the trade union movement, with this end in view, they instigated casteism among Muslims and Pillaimar Community. Even as early as 1938 trouble started between the Muslims and Hindus in the labour field in Madurai, S.I.F. Ibrahim Shaib, Municipal Councillor, formed a union for Muslim workers, immediately after the bij strike of 1938. As the newly formed union tried to recruit as many workers as possible from Muslims, clashes broke out between "ne rival groups. 67

In February 1941, communal feeling led to a number of stabbing outrages involving two deaths and

66. Ibid.
67. G.O. No. 3044, Development, December 8, 1938
minor injuries in Madurai. There was a tendency to introduce communal feeling into the labour matters, a section of the Muslims taking objection to the fact that the recognised labour leader in Madurai (S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu) was a Hindu. 68 To avert further trouble, the District Magistrate of Madurai banned meetings and processions. Eventually, with great difficulty, the management of the Madura Mills put down the Muslim Labour Union in 1941. 69 The communists utilised the apathy of the Muslim workers to build a base for them against Varadarajulu Naidu in Madurai.

The communists took advantage of the hostile attitude of the Pillaimar Community to strengthen their base over the Madura workers against Varadarajulu Naidu. As a result there were clashes between the members of Pillaimar Community and the Madura Labour Union. For instance on 24 August 1941, an aruval assault occurred between the two groups. The Management of the Madura Mills tried to wind up the association but in vain. On 14 January, 1944, a leading member of the Pillaimar

68 Fortnightly Report, February 25, 1941.
Association assaulted a committee member of the Madura Labour Union. Again, on 17 January 1944, with help of the communists they attacked the union members with aruvals, vel sticks and soda-water bottles. Stringent action was taken against the rioters resulting in the prosecution of fourteen rioters. The trouble ended temporarily. The chief secretary pointed out that the communists like Ramamurthi and K.P. Janaki Ammal were behind these incidents.  

The communists sought the help of Muslims, Pillaimar and other disgruntled workers to form a union. With their active co-operation, they formed the Madura Textile Workers' Union in May 1944 with Ramamurthi as its president. Slowly, the union gained in strength and position through propaganda and meetings.

In 1939, the Communists formed the Vikramapuram Textile Workers Union for the Papanasam workers and it was registered in 1940 under the Trade Union Act. With the launching of a communists conspiracy case in

70. Fortnightly Report, February 7, 1944.
71. G.O. No. 3840, Development, October 9, 1946.
Tinnevelly district in 1940 the local communist leaders were jailed. Hence the activities of the Textile Workers Union came to a stand still, till the release of these leaders in 1942. From then on, they worked with zeal for the growth of their influence among the workers of the Madura Mills, Papanasam.  

The management of the Madura Mills introduced a number of welfare measures yet, trouble broke out in April 1943, when the management decided to give two months wages as bonus. The management decided that half of the two months bonus should be deposited in the savings bank and the remaining half would be paid in cash. The Madura labour Union and the Papanasam Labour Union accepted the proposal of the management, but a section of the workers under communist influence declined to receive the amount. The communists initiated a campaign of resistance against the proposed scheme. The union also embarked on a more personal campaign against the Papanasam Labour Union as personified by its leader Varadarajulu Naidu. The Papanasam Labour Union was

73 Fortnightly Report, April 5, 1943.
characterised as a "dummy union" and "puppet in the hands of the Management", while Varadarajulu Naidu was openly accused of having misappropriated union funds.74

In Madurai also, inspired by communists, a section of the workers declined to receive the bonus. Communists from Madurai and elsewhere came down to Madurai and Papanasam and encouraged them to demand full bonus, and distributed leaflets criticising the attitude of the management. Consequently, on 15 March 1943, about 1500 workers demonstrated inside the mills. The District Magistrate thought that the interference was "entirely unjustified" since the workers were treated "extremely well" and there was a "deliberate intention to stir up trouble for justifiable reasons". Therefore, he arrested the ring-leaders of the demonstration under the Defence of India Rules and searched the District communist committee office. However, owing to the tactful handling of the situation by the Tahshidar of Ambasamudram, the Textile Workers Union agreed to receive half the bonus in cash and the Madurai workers followed suit.75 As a

result of this vigorous campaign, the communist unions both in Madurai and Papanasam increased their membership gradually but steadily.

In July 1943, soon after the agitation was over the payment of bonus, the management introduced a standing order: The standing Order No. 21 read: The Company's policy is to recognise one union only, which must be non-political and non-communal in character. The recognised union is at present Madura Labour Union. The company will not entertain representation from political or communal bodies purporting to speak on behalf of its workers. Any worker who is found to work in a manner that will prejudice the above policy may be dismissed as being guilty of misconduct under the standing order". 76

There is no precise evidence regarding the circumstances under which this standing order was brought into existence. Varadarajulu Naidu said that it was arrived at as a result of an agreement between him and the management. Doak, management of the mills, was very keen at that time in discouraging rival unions. He urged that the penal clauses with standing order prohibiting

active support of a rival union was intended to prevent dissipation among the rank and file, and to ensure the full productive capacity of the mills. The communists alleged that the standing order took away from the workers their fundamental right to form themselves into free trade unions unfettered by the management. Soon after the introduction of the standing order, the management dismissed number of workers who disobeyed the order. The communists approached the management for the reinstatement of the seven dismissed workers and for cancellation of the standing order but in vain. Norman Strathie, the then member-in-charge of the Labour conferred with Doak and impressed upon him that the dismissal of workers for membership of rival union or for active propaganda against it was contrary to the principles of trade unionism as hitherto accepted in India. He persuaded Doak, to reinstate the dismissed workers and advised him to simply ignore the communists. Doak refused to accept any arbitration and Strathie, therefore, allowed him to have his own way. Because he thought that his position was so strong and his

77. G.O No. 3840, Development, October 9, 1946
general treatment of workers was so good, that he might be able to steer through without serious consequences. The Government, therefore, issued an order rejecting the request of the communists for adjudication. 78

A petition, signed by 9439 citizens of Madurai, strongly condemned the Government's indifferent attitude and blamed that it had not done anything to protect the elementary rights of the workers for the last two years though numerous representations and resolutions were sent to the Government by the communists. It stated that when there was shortage of cloth, the dismissal of workers under a "high-handed" standing order would not only hinder the production of cloth but also would make the shortage of cloth more acute. To protect the elementary trade union rights of the workers, the citizens of Madurai requested the government to take steps for the reinstatement of workers dismissed for disobedience of the standing order. 79 More than twenty five communist controlled trade unions in various parts of the Madras Presidency also passed resolutions against the standing order and urged the intervention of the Government. In

78. G.O. No. 2527, Public Works, November 19, 1943.
a reply to it, the Advisor to the Governor stated that "he had seen no reason whatever why Government should interfere in what was essentially a fight between two unions as to which should be recognised or join the alternative to compel the amalgamation of the two unions". On 28 July, 1945, the Government, however, decided not to interfere in the labour trouble at the Madura Mills at Madurai and Papanasam. 80

Yet, a favourable situation ushered in, when the Papanasam workers demanded Varadarajulu Naidu to furnish accounts for the large sum of money collected for the union. He coolly ignored their request; suspecting fraud, Muhamed Hanifa, a member of the Textile Workers Union filed a criminal complaint against Varadarajulu Naidu before the Joint Magistrate, Shermadevi for criminal breach of trust of the union funds. The magistrate ordered Varadarajulu Naidu to appear before him for trial and to produce the records of the union. As he failed to do so, the police as per the court warrant seized the records of union and sealed the union. It was a severe blow to the reputation of Varadarajulu Naidu and his unions both at Papanasam and Madurai. In the

light of the available evidence, the Joint Magistrate, Shermadevi framed charges against Varadarajulu Naidu for misappropriation of the union funds to the extent of Rs. 12,000. On 16 June 1944, the court convicted and sentenced him to one year rigorous imprisonment. Varadarajulu filed an appeal in the District and Sessions Court, Tinnevelly, but it was dismissed and the sentence of the lower court was confirmed. On 16 March 1945, the Madras High Court confirmed the conviction and on 25 March he was imprisoned.  

The imprisonment of Varadarajulu Naidu, was to the advantage of the communists in Madurai and Tinnevelly who gradually strengthened their position in the labour field. It should be noted that even though the court convicted Varadarajulu Naidu for misappropriation of union funds, the European Management supported him in order to eradicate communist influence among the workers.

While official communism was ranged ostensibly on the side of the Government, communist generally had

81. Ibid.
been making full use of the difficult food situation and restiveness among the labourers to increase the hold on the workers. Communist leaders addressed a number of meetings under the auspices of the communist party and called upon workers to increase production in order to save themselves, the nation and the government from Axis aggression. However, they were active wherever possible in exploiting labour grievances. In Coconada where there were a number of important military works, they instigated some of the workers to demand higher wages, but unsuccessfully.82 In Vizagapatnam, the cartmen at the Chittivalasa Jute Mills went on strike from 7 to 10 March for a number of grievances.83 In Madras city there was a certain amount of tension between the Madras Labour Union and communists. On 1 March 1944, the communists held a meeting at which they condemned the Secretary of the Labour Union for carrying on anti-communists propaganda. The Labour Union on its side, held a number of propaganda meetings and warned the workers against playing into the hands of the communists.84

82. Fortnightly Report, March 23, 1944
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
On 22 May 1944, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras Presidency pointed out that "the communists" continued their vendetta against the Madras Labour Union and they had formed a reorganisation committee with the object of wresting power from the present leaders of the union. On 25 May 1944, a branch of the "friends of the Soviet Union" was inaugurated under the presidency of T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar. In Madurai the rivalry between the supporters of the Madras Labour Union and the communists resulted in disturbance at meetings held by the two parties, and the government found it necessary to prohibit meetings in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills area after dusk.

Thus, by 1945, the Communists attempted seriously to broaden-based and strengthen their hold over the workers in the Madras Presidency. The strike action during the days of the Quit India Movement in 1942 was both political and economical. The Congress leaders, taking advantage of the economic plight of the workers, organised the labour to further their political cause.

86. Fortnightly Report, June 8, 1944.
87. Fortnightly Report, November 6, 1944.
Though the attitude of the communist was ambivalent, the workers wanted to strengthen the unity among the workers. Forms of the protest during the period varied from stoppage of work to violent sabotage.

This period saw the rise of rival unions. The management was keen on maintaining and recognising the pliable leadership of the unions. Right to form unions came to be increasingly asserted. Occasional intervention of the public in the strikes was a novel phenomenon. Moreover, both the Congress and communist union adopted pressure-tactics. It does not mean that the unions were mere pressure-groups. They agitated for better wages. The Congress made efforts to bring them under their control. So that they could mobilise them in the course of nationalist movement. They were successful to a certain extent. The Indian National Congress adopted pressure-compromise-pressure formula to overthrow the yoke of British rule. Similar technique is reflected in the handling of the labour movement. Meanwhile the communists were emerging as a challenge to the Congress leadership. Both were competing to exercise hegemonic influence over the workers.