CHAPTER III

CONGRESS POLICY IN ACTION - 1937-39: SOME CASE STUDIES

The coming of the Congress Ministries in seven out of eleven provinces of British India and its significance in terms of any study on the trade union movement in India has been stated earlier in this thesis. The overall policy approach of the Congress and the legislative interventions with regard to the question of labour disputes explains, only a part of the story. In this Chapter, an attempt will be made to study some of the strikes and the use of the repressive machinery of the state, in detail in Madras Presidency so as to arrive at a generalisation on the Congress policy towards labour. This attempt is significant because despite certain limitations imposed on the powers of the ministries, such an analysis will offer some definite hints at the Congress attitude towards labour in general.

REPRESSIVE MEASURES

Government intervention in labour capital disputes took the form of arrests, lathicharge and firings in a couple of instances and it is necessary for us to look at these instances in brief. The first such intervention by the police occurred closely after the Government communiqué of October 1937, when on the 8th of November 1937 a stay-in
strike by the workers in Lakshmi Mills, Coimbatore, took place when a red paper flag was snatched away from a maistry and torn to pieces by another. The workers were asked by the District Magistrate "to work or leave the mills. They declined to adopt either course. It was then decided to eject the strikers... The additional police arrived... The strikers were persuaded by one of the labour leaders to leave. The strikers left. The management then declared a lockout and that mill was closed."
The use of police against the workers continued without fail during the entire period of the Congress Ministries. In almost all the cases it was done when the workers resorted to picketing of their respective industry in response to the attempt by the employers to recruit fresh labour during a strike and in some cases as seen earlier to 'eject' the stay-in-strikers. It had happened in Puthiyara (Malabar district) during the strike in the Commonwealth Tile Works in September 1937, when the strikers "performed 'Satyagraha' on the road in front of the gates and had to be removed" and also leading to the prosecution of the leader of the Union P. Krishna Pillai. Let us look at some of the more notable events


of this nature that followed during the period, in the following table.

**TABLE 3.1**

**DETAILS OF POLICE INTERVENTION IN LABOUR DISPUTES BETWEEN JANUARY 1938 AND NOVEMBER 1939**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of factory/Town/District</th>
<th>Month/Year</th>
<th>Alleged cause of intervention- Course of events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I.L.T.D. CO. Chirala Guntur Distt.</td>
<td>February 1938</td>
<td>Picketing at the gates of the mills by the strikers. At 1.30 P.M. on 14th February 1938 after mid-day interval a large crowd gathered outside the factory and attacked the police force which was present there to protect the black legs going to work. The S.D.M. allowed those who wished to work to enter the factory. Several attempts were made to disperse the crowd on the road. The police had to fire on two occasions ... Three men were killed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jamal Glass Works, Madras</td>
<td>June, 1938</td>
<td>Workers resorted to picketing as the employers continued to run the factory with fresh recruits. Ten strikers who picketed the proprietors were arrested and charged under the City Police Act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Diocesan Press Madras</td>
<td>June, 1938</td>
<td>The press continued to run and the workers resorted to picketing and they were charged under the City Police Act.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Choolai Mills
Madras
July, 1938
The mills were closed following a strike. The strikers resorted to picketing when some bales of cloth were being transported from the mills and 45 workers were charged under the City Police Act.

5. Mahalaxmi Mills
Madura
October, 1938
A strike began on the 13th October, but the management kept the mill working with labour from outside. On 14th the strikers who were picketing the mill stopped a car bringing some workmen, by lying down on the road. 150 workers were arrested and prosecuted. The same thing happened the next day and the police resorted to lathi charge injuring two women. The leader of the Union Muthuramalinga Thevar (Socialist) was arrested and prosecuted under Sec. 143 & 341, I.P.C. Orders under Sec.144, Cr.P.C. was passed to control picketing.

6. Chittivalasa
Jute Mills, Vizagapatam
February, 1939
The workers staged a stay-in-strike on the 14th February. The District Magistrate went to the mill and with the help of the reserve police attempted to eject the strikers to which there was resistance. The police fired four shots and cleared the mills with lathis.

7. EID & Sugar
Mills Nellikuppam
April, 1939
Strike started on 26th April. The management employed fresh labour & ran the mills. On 6th May, orders under Sec. 144 were passed directing the labour leader Jaganathan (Communist) to
quit Nellikupam within 6 hours and prohibiting processions, meeting and picketing. A procession was taken next day which was lathicharged and Jaganathan and other leaders were arrested.

8. Indian Express July, Press, Madras 1939
Picketing was resorted to by the strikers. Two of the leaders of the Press Labour Union, A.S.K. Ayyangar and B. Srinivasa Rao (Communists) were convicted for offenses in this connection and C.P. Elango was prohibited from making speeches.

Picketing that was resorted to by the workers from 29th June was regulated by orders under 144 Cr.P.C. A large number of arrests and exemplary sentences were imposed.

Note: Compiled from the Fortnightly Reports on the Political Situation in the Madras Presidency for the respective periods.

It is pertinent to state at this stage, that the use of police machinery and other repressive measures in the event of labour disputes was not unique to Madras. For instance, the General Secretary of the AITUC in January 1938 stated as follows;

Six months have passed since the Congress accepted offices in six major provinces of India. The record
of the Congress Ministries during these six months is none too pleasant... To speak in general terms, the working class, its movement and struggles received practically the same stepmotherly treatment that was accorded to them under the former regimes. At the time of strikes we witness the same arrests and prosecutions, the same banning of meetings and processions and the same attempt to crush the strikes. 3

In this context, let us now look into greater detail, the repressive measures let loose by the Congress Ministry in Madras in the strikes that took place at Chirala and Chittivalasa, where the repression extended to even firing by the police during their strikes.

CHIRALA AND CHITTIVALASA STRIKES

The dispute at Chirala was primarily caused by the dismissal of two workers, who were also in the forefront of the union activities, on the 8th February 1938. This sparked a sit-in strike and the management of the Indian Leaf Tobacco Development Company, where the dispute had taken place declared a lock-out. 4 The attempt by the Minister for


4. Fortnightly Reports, 1st half of February 1938, F.No. 18/2/38, Home Political, (NAI).
Industries and Labour to bring about a settlement failed due to the refusal of the management to concede to the demands of the workers such as, reinstatement of the two dismissed workers as well as to recognise their union.  

The day following this, i.e. on the 14th February, 1938, the workers collected in front of the factory to protest against the recruiting of substitute labour to run the factory. It was then that Chirala witnessed a ghastly repression when,

the police carried out lathi charges on the workers chasing them over a distance... Returning from their lathi 'chase' they fell upon another section of the crowded workers this time reinforced by a batch of Reserves who fired into the unarmed crowd killing three and injuring two...  

This action by the police, the first of its kind during the period of the Congress Ministry sent ripples throughout the province. The Guntur District Congress Committee conducted an inquiry into the firing in Chirala and in its report stated "...that the workers were peaceful and the police had been guilty of wanton lathicharges and firing." This

5.  *The Hindu* (Madras), 14th February 1938.  
however, was not accepted by the Government of Madras. In turn, the Government ordered an enquiry to be conducted by an official, Justice Horwill, whose report had found "...that the police were justified in opening fire in the circumstance in which they were placed..."\(^8\) Apart from this the report, recorded that,

...the workers were obviously not seasoned non-violent resisters and the firing had to be so as to impress the mob that the police were serious about it.\(^9\)

This, clearly, meant a signal to the events to come. The arrests and prosecutions continued in Chirala for some time under the Congress Ministry. Following closely on the heels of Chirala, came similar events in Chittivalasa, the centre of jute industry in Vizagapatam District. As in the case of Chirala, the dispute in the Chittivalasa Jute Mills was a long drawn out one.

The dispute began on 27th April 1938, involving all the 3200 workers of the mills when the management declared a retrenchment of about 260 workers in consequence to its decision to "reduce the hours of work in the mills from 59 to

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The strike went on till the end of July, when the Government intervened to appoint a Court of Enquiry to look into the dispute and the workers resumed work. The Report of the Court of Enquiry, was accepted by the workers, despite that they were not satisfied with it; but the worst came when the management refused to implement the recommendations of the Court. In this situation a worker was dismissed for alleged reduction of output and this provoked a stay-in-strike by the workers from 14th February 1939. The management declared a lockout but the workers stayed in, refusing to go out of the mills.

Repeated warnings by the local officials and the police asking the workers to quit were of no avail. But the worst happened around midnight when,

... the lights were put out all over the mill at 12.45 A.M. This caused confusion and the workers tried to come out through the only gate which was open... The police fired 10 rounds.... as the workers streamed past the gate, they were being beaten by the police.... the mill compound was cleared.... The brutality of the police caused the

11. Ibid
12. The Hindu (Madras) 15 February 1939.
These two instances serve to illustrate the attitude of the Congress Ministry headed by Rajaji in Madras. The Madras Government had enunciated its policy towards labour in October 1937 as one where 'internal' settlement of disputes were to be preferred over external intervention. But in practice, as has been seen hitherto, the Government's repressive machinery, whether it be police or use of the prohibitive statutes, invariably took the side of the employer, in the name of maintaining law and order. Let us look at a few more of such instances.

A CASE STUDY OF COIMBATORE STRIKE

The first major strike that broke out after the formation of the Rajaji Ministry was in the textile mills in Coimbatore. The strike began on the 27th October 1937 in the Saroja Mill in Singanallur and soon spread to the other mills and "by 31st October about 10,000 hands employed in ten mills in the town and surrounding villages were on strike." This general strike of the textile workers was a consequence of


the refusal of the managements of the mills to grant the annual Diwali Bonus. It is to be noted here that "... a claim for the bonus had been made as far back as the beginning of April."\(^{15}\) Notwithstanding the fact that the immediate provocation to the strike came from the non-payment of bonus, the low rates of wages in the Coimbatore mills in relation to the same in the other textile centres as has been seen in Chapter 1 (Table-1.3) had provided for the creation of an explosive condition. This is evident from a note, in this context, by V.V. Giri in which he stated as follows:

... Having studied the situation at Coimbatore, I told the mill owners when I was there that they will soon have trouble... I fear an Enquiry into the grievances of Textile workers may become inevitable...\(^{16}\).

The strike that broke out as a consequence of these pent-up grievances brought to fore, for the first time, not only the Government's attitude towards the plight of the workers, but also the diversity between the Congress and the Communist trade unionists which were to manifest themselves

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15. Fortnightly Report of the D.M. Coimbatore for the 2nd half of October 1937, G.O. 448 dtd. 21 February 1938, Development Dept. (Ms) (TNA)

16. Note by V.V. Giri to C. Rajagopalachary dtd. 30.10.37. in Rajagopalachary Papers (hereafter CR Papers), File No.9, Acc.No.1422. (NAI)
in the history of labour movement in the Presidency in the years that followed. In as far as the Government was concerned, the Minister for Industries and Labour, V.V. Giri visited Coimbatore with the singular purpose to "... create a good feeling at the minds of (our) officers in the district, that (we are prepared) to help them personally in times of necessity." The minister in the course of his tour addressed meetings of workers asking them to return to work. Soon after his return from Coimbatore, the Government issued a communique to the Press which stated as follows:

The attention of the Government is drawn to the present serious situation in Coimbatore and adjacent mill areas as a result of stoppage of work by the mill workers. The Government are given to understand that the textile workers affected by the present trade dispute may not possibly be aware of the contents of the recent Government communique defining their attitude in regard to trade disputes. ... They appeal to the workers affected in the present dispute

17. Report of the D.M. Coimbatore dtd. 13.11.37, G.0.448 dtd. 21 February 1938, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)

18. Letter from V.V. Giri to C. Rajagopalachary dtd. 31st October 1937 in CR Papers, File No.9, Acc.No.1422 (NAI)

19. Report of the D.M. Coimbatore dtd. 13.11.37, G.0. 448 dtd. 21 February 1938, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)
to follow the procedure indicated in the Government Communique to ventilate any existing grievances and to the employers to facilitate resumption of work by all the men without exception. 20

This effort by the Government was a clear cut endorsement of the position taken by the socialist leader of the Textile Workers' Union, N.G. Ramasamy, M.L.A., as well as the mill owner and Congress leader Sir Avinashilingam Chetty, M.L.A. as well as the District Congress Committee, who had together appealed "... to the workers to return to work immediately and allow the union to negotiate with the employers." 21 These attempts however "resulted in work being resumed in seven out of ten mills..." 22 This brought to fore the rift between the Communists and the Congress trade unionists to the fore. The Communists held out from calling off the strike in the absence of any concrete offer apart from the proposal of the Government to constitute a Court of Enquiry and thus the men in the C.S & W Mills, the Kaleeswara Mills and the Somasundaram Mills refused to resume


21. Report by the Taluq Magistrate, Coimbatore dtd. 28 October, 1937, G.O. 2494 dtd. 9th November 1937, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)

22. Report by the D.M. Coimbatore dtd. 13.11.37, G.O. 446, dtd. 21 February 1938, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)
work until the 16th November 1937.23

The political fallout of this, will be discussed in Chapter VI of the thesis, but suffice it to state in this context that this general strike had sown the seeds for the ensuing rift in the Coimbatore trade union movement, characterised, to put it in the words of the Collector of Coimbatore as a case of "Congress versus Communists propaganda."24 The Government constituted a Court of Enquiry to go into the industrial unrest in the Coimbatore mills arising out of the strikes on 10th October 1937.25 The industrial peace thus achieved through the combined efforts of the Government of Madras and the Coimbatore District Textile Workers' Union did not last long. The Court of Enquiry submitted its findings by July 1938. The Court stated among other things that, "Except in two or three cases, there is no mill which has within the last five or six years declared a dividend of less than 6 per cent"26 and in this context recommended a wage hike. Following closely on

23. Ibid

24. Letter from the Collector of Coimbatore to the Commissioner of Labour dtd. 8 November 1937, G.O. 2494, dtd. 9th November 1937, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)


the heels of the report of the Court of Enquiry, the Government of Madras announced in August 1938 that there should be a general increase in wages with effect from 1st June 1938.27

While the Textile Workers' Union (controlled by the Congressman N.G. Ramasamy) and the Mill Workers Union (controlled by the Communists - P. Jeevanandam) considered this a victory, the reaction of the employers to the recommendations was adverse. In a communication addressed to the Government, the Indian Chamber of Commerce wrote as follows:

In the opinion of this Chamber no other Government Communication or report has probably been received with great apprehension and anxiety than the report of the recent Coimbatore Court of Enquiry. To add to this, the Governments endorsement of the findings of the Court has completely undermined the confidence of the investing public... in this province...28

The refusal of some of the mills in instituting wage hikes resulted in the outbreak of strikes again in a few


mills but by the end of 1938, the mills had by and large implemented the recommendations of the Court of Enquiry.

Following closely on the heels of this, the Coimbatore Textile Industry began to face a crisis of overproduction and the South Indian Mill Owners' Association (SIMA) announced "On 15th July 1939 ... that in view of the serious depression in the Cotton Textile Industry, such of their member mills ... should curtail their production of yarn by 50 per cent either by the abolition of the night shift or by the reduction of working hours. In pursuance of this resolution 15 mills notified their intention to abolish the night shift from 1st August 1939."29 This decision sent ripples among the ranks of both the unions in Coimbatore who saw these measures as a definite attempt to reduce the wages bill. In this context, "The Workers Unions in Coimbatore ... threatened a general strike if night shifts are abolished."30

It is to be noted here, that notwithstanding the fact that the proposed abolition/retrenchment did not take place, essentially due to the improved market conditions with the outbreak of the war, the issue brought to fore the essential conflict in the two unions in Coimbatore on this issue. Let

29. Letter from the Commissioner of Labour dtd. 3.8.39 to the Secretary, Development Dept. Government of Madras. G.O. 2287, dtd. 19 September 1939, Development Dept. (Confdl.) (TNA)

30. The Hindu (Madras), July 1939
us look into this aspect in the context of the attitude of the Government of Madras on this crisis.

The proposed date set by the SIMA for the closure of night shifts was 1st August 1939; "... After prolonged discussions and in deference to the wishes of the Hon. Minister, the representatives of the Association agreed to postpone the closure of the night shift to the 7th August 1939." Soon after arriving at this compromise, the Government ordered an enquiry into this by the Commissioner of Labour, whose report stated as follows:

...I am inclined to accept the condition of the SIMA that at the current prices of Indian yarn, it will not be possible for them to continue production on the present scale. 

This, however amounted to an acceptance in principle of the idea of retrenchment and thus following on this line in a joint meeting held on 18th August 1939, at Madras,

Before the Hon. Minister for Industry and Labour, the Coimbatore Mill-Owners agreed to reduce the working hours by one-third instead of by one half.

31. Letter from the Commissioner of Labour dtd. 3.8.39 to the Secretary, Development Dept., Government of Madras, G.0.2287, dtd. 19 September 1939, Development Dept., (Confld.) (TNA)

32. Ibid
N.G. Ramaswami, M.L.A. for labour and P. Ramamurthi, Socialist, were present in Madras and the former accepted the settlement. ... Ten Mills reduced their working hours from the 7th August and four more were to reduce the hours from the 14th of this month. 33

When the threat of either a considerable reduction in the number of mill hands or a substantial cut in the monthly wages of those employed, both of which was to bring about unprecedented hardship to the workers, loomed large, "the Coimbatore District Textile Workers' Union representing over 22,000 workers with Mr. N.G. Ramasamy as President, ... responded to the situation by a pledge of working the compromise and then of reviewing the situation at the end of one month." 34

Thus when the Pro-Congress Union co-operated and accepted "the advice tendered by the Government ... that the reduction of output will be lowered by one-third ... as indispensable for saving the industry", 35 the Communist led Union expressed "that behind the plea of trade depression advanced by the mill owners for closing night shifts was an attempt to

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34. Indian Express, (Madras), 12 August 1939, Ibid

35. Ibid
deprive the workers of the benefit of the increase in wages recommended by the Court of Enquiry."36 In a Public meeting held under the auspices of the Coimbatore Mill Workers Union (Communist led) the following resolution was passed:

... The workers are convinced that the depression is grossly exaggerated and the proposed measure is calculated merely to keep their margin of profits intact. In any event, the workers reject the principle of transferring the burden of any depression on the shoulders of the workers, even as the workers do not share the prosperity in boom years with the employers ...

If however the managements persist in the continuation of the system, this meeting resolves to resist such attempts by means of a general strike from the 11th of next month (September, 1939) and calls upon the workers to make intense preparations for the general strike... 37

The resolution also placed on record, its unhappiness over the approach of the Government of Madras in capitulating to the mill owners in the following terms;

The meeting is further of opinion that the Madras

36. Ibid Also see The Hindu, (Madras), 8 August 1939.
37. Ibid
Government, after making a thorough and searching enquiry into all aspects of the question, should have taken a definite stand on this question ... Pending such enquiry, ... the Madras Government should have brought pressure on the mill owners to carry on with the present position.\textsuperscript{38}

The response of the Minister for Industry and Labour to this call for a general strike against the proposed large scale retrenchment was a cryptic one liner that, "we need not be very perturbed over the threat."\textsuperscript{39} The possible conflict was however averted, as seen earlier, due to the outbreak of the war, which in its course, led to an increase in the labour force rather than a decrease by the following year, as seen in Chapter-i (Tables 1.1 & 1.2). Notwithstanding this, the textile crisis of 1939, in Coimbatore, brought the Congress Governments' attitude towards the problem of labour to the fore. It is evident from the events in Coimbatore as mentioned above that the Congress Government's approach to labour strikes was two fold in that, the Ministry while on the one hand attempted to encourage the constitutional trade union activities led by the Congress Socialist N.G. Ramasamy and at times openly sided with them, on the other hand, both the Premier as well as the Minister for Labour spared no

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid

\textsuperscript{39} Note by V.V. Giri, dtd. 30.8.1939. Ibid
effort to suppress the rise of the Communist trade unionists. It is pertinent at this stage to state the views of Rajaji in this context before we look at certain other examples of similar nature.

The antagonism to the rise and growth of Communist ideas in the labour front in specific was explicitly stated by the Prime Minister, as early as in October 1937, in the context of the arrest and prosecution of S.S. Batliwala, the Communist leader from Bombay for sedition. In a letter to the President of AICC in this context, Rajaji wrote,

... it is unfortunate that certain groups think that Madras is the proper experimenting ground for activities among labour unions and in rebellion areas. Because this Province is made the target of left wingers from outside I have necessarily to be first in the field in drawing the line of demarcation between liberty and licence and between freedom of opinion and incitement to violence and disorder. I knew we may have a crisis over this and I am prepared for it.

40. Swadesamitran, (Madras) 5 October 1937.

41. Letter from C. Rajagopalachary to Vallabhai Patel (President, AICC) dtd. 12.10.1937. C.R. Papers, File No.5, Acc. No.1420 (NAI)

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This determination of Rajaji to break the growth and influence of Communist ideas in the labour front was further exemplified in the case of labour movement in Madura than in Coimbatore. Again, the experience in Madura also witnessed the conscious efforts of the Ministry to aid the growth of constitutional trade unionism, as a counter to the influence of the Communists and the Socialists. Let us see this in detail in the following few pages.

TEXTILE STRIKES, 1937

The formation of the Congress Ministry in the province witnessed the outbreak of sporadic strikes in the Textile Mills at Madurai, Tuticorin and Papanasam as in the case of other centres of industries and by the end of 1937, there were at least 6 short lived strikes in the three centres accounting for a loss of more than 25 thousand mandays. This was definitely less than the loss in Coimbatore during the same period, more than 1.5 lakhs mandays in about 20 strikes.42 Notwithstanding this fact, the strikes in the Madura and Tinnevely mills in 1937 were a prelude to the massive drawn out strikes that ensued in the following year bringing to fore a very interesting aspect of the Labour-Ministry relationship to the foreground.

42. Statement of Trades Dispute that occurred in Madras Presidency Since 14th July 1937 and 25th January 1938. G.O. 1064, dtd. 23.4.38, Development Dept. (TNA)
The first dispute after the formation of the ministry was a more or less spontaneous response by the men at the ring frame department of the A. & F. Harvey Mills, Madura (hereafter Madura Mills) to the proposal by the management that "... the male workers in the ring frame department were to work two weeks on night shift followed by a week on day work." The refusal by the ring framers to work was followed by the other workers leading to a strike in the mills that lasted between the 7th and 16th of September 1937, when the Government of Madras constituted a Court of Enquiry to look into the dispute. Despite the short period of the strike, it is to be noted here that in "... a few instances of violent picketing (sic) by the strikers, 18 cases were put up under section 12 of Act III of 1889..." and "On the 15th a procession of strikers clashed (sic) with police who arrested 12." While this short-lived strike opened the account of the Government's intervention in the sphere of labour strikes in Madura, much was in store in the days to come.


44. The Hindu, (Madras) 17.9.1937.


This strike was followed by yet another sit in strike by the workers in the ring-frame department at the Harvey Mills at Ambasamudram demanding reduction of workload and in this, they were joined by the workers in the other departments too.\textsuperscript{47} The management responded to this by declaring that "... the mill at Ambasamudram would be closed indefinitely to teach the workers a lesson..."\textsuperscript{48} This dispute that began from the 16th November, lasted upto 22nd November 1937, when the workers resumed work 'unconditionally', but not before the Minister for Labour, V.V. Giri interfered and 'castigated' the workers for their action.

Soon after the dispute began, Giri got in touch with Mr. Doak, the General Manager of Harveys and in the course of his conversation stated the following:

I made it quite clear to Mr. Doak, ... that sufficient warning must be given so that workers must follow up throughout the Presidency the spirit and letter of our communique wherein we defined our labour policy with reference to trade disputes...\textsuperscript{49}

Apart from this statement which in principle declared that

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid

\textsuperscript{49} Letter from V.V. Giri to Rajagopalachary dtd. 20.11.1937. C.R. Papers, F.No.9, Acc. No. 1422 (NAI)
the strike was 'illegal', the Minister also expressed his agreement to the conditions put forward by the Management that,

1. the workers will be warned that if they do this again, they will be punished;

2. they should apologise for their behaviour and agree to conform to the general rules and conditions of the management, and

3. that Government should issue a Communique reiterating their policy, in connection with this strike. 50

In addition to these, the demand placed by the management that "... S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu, labour leader be unofficially prevented from going to Ambasamudram for the next four months..." 51 was agreed upon by the Minister in that, "... there would be nothing on record or official about the prohibition of Mr. Naidu's entry ... If that were so, ... we do not object. If however, there is any official tinge about it, it will be difficult for us to agree." 52

This official antagonism to the strikes in the Harvey Mills at Madura and Tinnevely Districts

50. Ibid
51. Ibid
52. Ibid
(Papanasam/Ambasamudram and Tuticorin) however ceased in the strikes that followed. As a matter of fact, in the massive strike that broke out in both the centres between January and April 1938, for once, the Madras Government seemed to go to any extent in supporting the cause of labour. The situation in the Harvey Mills was brewing up for a serious trouble since "... November 1937, the labour union at Ambasamudram, which is a branch of the Madura Labour Union, ... had been agitating for increase of wages to Madura level, reinstatement of dismissed workers, grant of sick leave, etc., ..." 53 The response of the management at this stage was a bit conciliatory in that, a marginal increase in wages in certain occupations was announced with effect from the 1st January 1938. 54 The workers "... being dissatisfied with the concession, struck work - about 4500 workers in the day shift on 2.1.'38 and the management thereupon closed the mills from that date affecting about 6300 workers." 55

While thus a strike was in progress in the Ambasamudram Mill of the Harveys, "On 9th January the Madura Labour Union gave a strike notice demanding shorter hours of work and increased bonus and among other things to put a stop


55. Report on Trade Disputes for the week ending 14.1.1938. G.O. 86, dtd. 10.1.1939, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)
to the victimization of union activists."56 While the preparations for the strike were going on, on 26 January 1938, ... the management suspended, pending enquiry, a workman who had been marked absent with leave on the previous day... At the instigation of this workman about 4000, went on lightning strike. After the arrival of police, the workers left the mills in an orderly manner. The management closed the mills indefinitely.57

The fact that about 11,500 workers in Madura alone had now added to the more than 6000 workers in Ambasamudram sent ripples in the political circles and "volunteers began to collect funds in towns around Papanasam."58 In a public meeting organised under the auspices of the Tinnevely District Congress Committee on 6th February 1938, R.S.T. Pillai, Convenor of the District Congress Labour Sub-committee stated that, "... the Congress party was bound by its Karachi resolution to support the cause of labour against capitalism and imperialism and that the public should help the strikers.\"59

56. *Ibid*
58. Letter from D.M. Tinnevely dtd. 10.2.1938. *Ibid*
59. *Ibid*
The involvement of the local Congress leaders on the side of the workers, perhaps, acted as a deterrent to the use of police in this strike as was the experience in the earlier instances. Thus while the strike continued unabated, with a large number of the workers "... leaving the town for their villages to earn their livelihood...". It was at this stage when the uneasy silence was continuing in both the centres the management put forward a proposal to leave the dispute at Ambasamudram to a Court of Enquiry, the findings of which was to be binding on them. In the case of their Mill in Madura, they announced on the 26th March 1938 that they were willing to reopen the Mill "... but that a number of night workers who had caused much of the industrial trouble would not be re-employed... All the workers of over 2 years service would be employed ... but the 3000 new hands would be dismissed...". Incidentally, the lot of workers who faced dismissal were "... mostly the younger men who were supporters of the Union Secretary.".

The scenario of 3000 men being rendered unemployed in

60. Letter from D.M. Madura dtd. 11.2.1938. Ibid
62. Report on Trade Disputes for week ending 25.3.38. G.O. 86, dtd. 10.1.1939, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)
63. Ibid
itself was enough to provoke violence in the mill area and this necessitated an intervention by the Government. The management put up a notice to the effect that the Madura Mills will reopen on 20th April 1938. The town had by then begun to witness incidence of violence against the jobbers of strike breakers. 64 It was at this stage on 19th April the Government of Madras served an order under Sec.144 Cr. P.C. prohibiting the reopening of the Mills for a period of one month. 65 The reason for this act of the Government was stated in the order itself as follows:

Without a promise on the part of management to take back all the men without waiting for the Court of Enquiry, to be appointed, will lead to a very dangerous situation as picketing will certainly be attempted despite any orders to prohibit it, and that in consequence it would necessitate police to use force and that reopening of Madura Mills in these

64. Report of the Board of Arbitration - Madura Mills Dispute. G.O. 1050(1), dtd. 21.4.1938, Development Dept. (TNA)

65. Report on Trade Disputes for week ending 15.4.1938. G.O. 86, dtd. 10.1.1939, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)
circumstances is likely to lead to breaches of peace or riots or affrays.

This act by the Government, however broke the resistance of the Harvey Mill's management and a settlement was arrived at by which the question of wages at Ambasamudram were to be referred for arbitration by the Commissioner of Labour and his decision was to be binding on both parties. In regard to the Madura Mills, the management agreed to obtain the opinion of the arbitrator on the question of reduction of night running without being bound to accept the opinion but pending further decision, the mills to reopen with full strength. Thus, the strikes in the two mills of Harveys came to an end on 24th April 1938. This was perhaps a unique experience in the history of labour movement in the Province, especially during the period of the Congress Ministry, in which the Government intervened firmly on the side of the workers and broke the recalcitrant management and forced it to submission. This however, was not to be seen even once again in the period that followed, until the outbreak of the war. On the contrary, the Government reacted

66. Copy of the order served on 19th April 1938 found in the Madura Mills Record Room. Cited in Eamon Murphy, Unions in Conflict, (Delhi, 1981), p. 176. (The copy of the order, surprisingly is not found in any of the G.O.s relating to the strike in TNA).

67. Report on Trade Disputes for week ending 22.4.1938. G.O. 86, dtd. 10.1.1939, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA)
in just the opposite manner in the same town of Madura during a strike that followed the Harvey Mills strike, in the Mahalaxmi Mills in September-October 1938 - barely six months later. Let us look into this strike in brief before making certain conclusions on this issue.

The case of the Mahalakshmi Mills, situated at Pasumalai, a suburb of Madurai was characterised by very low wages and of absolute tyranny by the management who had habitually fired the workers on the grounds of breaches of Mill discipline on even the flimsiest grounds. To top it all Mr. Varadarajulu Naidu, who happened to be the leader of their union too, showed scant interest to their problem. For instance, in a memorandum sent to the Government of Madras, the workers had stated their unpleasantness about the leadership of Mr. Naidu in absolutely clear terms, when they wrote that his "... services for the cause of labourers in other mills seem to have had some benefit. But unfortunately, we were disappointed in our expectations of him." This combination of a wretched condition of work combined with the vacuum created by Naidu, cleared the way for the springing up of an alternate leadership in the Mills


69. Petition submitted to the Government of Madras by 14 dismissed employees of the Mahalaxmi Mill, Madura, G.O. 3044, dtd. 8.2.1939, Development Dept. (TNA)
and this was provided by the birth of the Mahalakshmi Textile Workers' Union by July 1938 with "Muthuramalinga Thevar as President and an executive consisting of some Communists." 70

The immediate cause to the formation of a new union was however the dismissal of some 14 workers as a sequel to a brief spontaneous strike in May 1938 and the implicit support by Varadarajulu Naidu to the action of the management. 71 Soon after its formation, the new union "... put forward a number of demands including recognition of the union, increased wages and the reinstatement of the workers who had been dismissed..." 72 and served a strike notice on the 16th September 1938. 73 Ironically, the spate of dismissals continued unabated and by the 13th October 1938, when a strike began in the Mill, the number of dismissed workers had risen to 70. 74

The response by the management to the strike was an appeal to Varadarajulu Naidu to supply substitute labour to keep the mills running to which, Mr. Naidu readily agreed.

70. Ibid
71. Ibid
72. Ibid
73. Swadesamitran, (Madras) 17.9.1938.
74. G.O 3044, dtd. 8.2.1939, Development Dept. (TNA)
The workers resorted to picketing followed by lathicharges and prosecution of a lot of workers and the leader of the Union and Congress M.L.A., Mathuramalinga Thevar.\(^75\) This was not all as witnessed from the events that followed. "On 18th October, the Government prohibited any form of picketing by an order under Section 144 Cr.P.C."\(^76\) and issued a communique "... strongly disapproving of the strikers and the leadership of Mathuramalinga Thevar."\(^77\) The arrests and lathicharges continued until the findings of a Government Enquiry as well as an enquiry by the labour sub-committee of the Congress found the management guilty in dismissing the workers and the management agreeing to concede to the demands of the workers. The strike ended on the 5th November 1938 when all the 498 workers returned to work but the trial of those arrested continued.\(^78\)

It is to be noted here that while on the one hand the workers resisted the combined repression of the police as well as the pro-management leader Mr. Naidu, and won their demands, on the other hand what is of importance from within the scope of this chapter is the use of Section 144 Cr. P.C.

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75. Ibid

76. Fortnightly Reports for the second half of October 1938, F.No. 18/10/38, Home Political (NAI)

77. Ibid

on this occasion for just the opposite purpose from that of the earlier instance of a similar nature by the same Congress Ministry. The adverse reaction to this, came from none other than V.V. Giri who wrote to the Premier in this context as follows;

... regarding Pasumalai Trade Dispute, I think it is hardly fair that we should still proceed, with the trial of workers, including women. I see also the magistrate is giving sentences extending over four months to them... I feel that all the convictions made so far is enough and they should be released holding that the period of sentence undergone is enough ... Under the circumstances, 144 was certainly justifiable, ... Mr. Varadarajulu should not have taken the unnecessary responsibility of supplying black legs to the Mahalakshmi Mills. It was none of his business to do so; ... I honestly feel that in matters relating to Trade Disputes, we must not only be tactful, but practical and discreet... 79

The response of the Premier, Rajaji to this was as follows;

...My intention is that only the cases against Mathuramalinga Thevar and Jeevanandam should remain

79. Letter from V.V. Giri to Rajagopalachary dtd. 8.11.1938. CR Papers, File No.9, Acc. No.1421 (NAI)
indisposed of. The rest may all be withdrawn...

The efforts by the Premier in specific to apply double standards in favour of the constitutionalist trade unionist, Varadarajulu as exemplified in the two cases mentioned above continued and during a strike in the Minakshi Mills, Madurai which went on between March and May 1939, the District Magistrate of Madura expressed his dismay at the effort of the Ministry to protect Mr. Naidu and noted as to why "...the police should be employed unnecessarily to save Varadarajulu’s face." This however did not dissuade Rajaji, and even after the Court of Enquiry, constituted in the context of the Minakshi Mills strike "... found Varadarajulu Naidu guilty of embezzlement of Union funds and authoritarianism in the Union..." surprisingly, Rajaji, (now no longer the Premier) wrote to Mr. Naidu on 8th March 1940 as follows;

... I have heard some talk indicating that there is a feeling in your Labour Union that you act without consulting your Executive Council. I can understand how such grievances are manufactured among ignorant

80. Confidential letter from Rajagopalachary to the Chief Secretary, Government of Madras, dtd. 19.11.1938. Ibid
81. Report of the D.M. Madura, dtd. 29.3.1939. G.0.1032, Public (Gen) dtd. 23.6.1939. (TNA)
82. Swadesamitran, (Madras) 18.5.1939.
people. ... I would advise you to hold regular meetings of the Executive Council and to have the accounts at least roughly audited and passed every month ... You can guess the spirit with which I write this, and therefore, I hope you will not misunderstand my remarks... 83

This perhaps, explains the love that the Premier had bestowed upon a strike breaker and an autocratic labour leader on the one hand and on the other his determination to put an end to the Communist influence in the name of 'law and order' as has been seen earlier. This being so, let us now look at, very briefly the attitude of the Government in labour disputes in Madras City.

STRIKES IN MADRAS CITY, 1937

The Government intervention in the disputes in Madras, to begin with was during the strike in the B & C Mills, as early as in October 1937 by means of the Press Communiqué 'deprecating strikes ...' as has been seen earlier. Let us now look into three instances of intervention, which exemplified the anti-labour content of the Ministry in its essence.

83. Letter from Rajagopalachary to Varadarajulu Naidu dtd. 8.3.1940 CR Papers, File no.6, Acc. No.1420 (NAI)
About 120 workers in the Richardson and Cruddas workshop went on strike from the 25th January 1939, in protest against the retrenchment of 36 workers "... owing to slackness in trade." 84 The trouble began when the management put up a notice on 28.1.39 stating that "... fresh hands would be entertained on 30.1.39 and the strikers willing to resume work should apply as new hands." 85 While none of the strikers applied, some new hands were entertained leading to picketing at the gates of the workshop. The Government responded to this with immediate effect and,

... 40 strikers on 31.1.39 and 37 on 2.2.39 were convicted under sections 143 and 341 I.P.C. for having caused obstruction to loyal workers and sentenced to undergo imprisonment till the rising of the Court and fined Rs.10/- in default to undergo one month Rigorous Imprisonment. The fine was not paid and they were sent to jail. 86

This act of the Government provoked sympathy strikes in at least 8 foundries in the adjacent areas of the workshop and soon after this, the management came to terms with the

84. Report on Strikes and Lockouts by the Commissioner of Labour. Week Ending 27.1.1939. G.0 297 dtd. 8.2.1940, Development Dept. (TNA)

85. Swadesamitran, (Madras) 28.1.1939

86. Report for week ending 3.2.1939. G.0. 297, dtd. 8.2.1940, Development Dept. (TNA)
workers and "...58 workers resumed work on 6.2.39. 77 workers to resume on their release from jail." 87

It was in more or less similar circumstances, that the workers in the Diocesan Press, Madras struck work from 31.1.39 demanding reinstatement of some discharged workers. The management declared closure of the Press indefinitely. The Minister for Labour, Giri, wrote about the dispute to the Premier as follows;

... There is a lot of discontent in the presses in the city, mostly due to the unsympathetic and anti-trade union attitude of the employers... in the matter of the Diocessan Press Dispute, where the Government appointed an arbitrator and his award was given, it was contemptuously set at naught by the employers... that is why there is trouble... 88

Notwithstanding the fact that it was admitted that the dispute was primarily due to the recalcitrance of the management of the Press, Mr. Giri, ironically, hastened to add in the same letter that,

... While we must give enough police protection to the owners, they must be distinctly made to

88. Letter form V.V. Giri to Rajagopalachary dtd. 27.1.1939 CR Papers, File No. 9, Acc. No.1421 (NAI)
understand, that they cannot get active help from the Government unless they are within their reasonable bounds...

The desire for such a justice to the cause of labour, however, did not last long and when "There was picketing by the workers on 1.2.39 and other days, 10 picketers (were) sentenced to two months Rigorous Imprisonment and bound over for 6 months for obstructing six clerks of the press from entering the press." Such instances of maintaining 'law and order' by using the police and the prohibitory orders by the Congress Ministry reached its highest watermark in the case of the strike in the Choolai Mills which began on the 9th February 1939 and lingered on until April 1939, when the management finally decided to close down the mills for good. Let us look into the details of this, before arriving at certain general conclusions.

The workers in the Choolai Mills had gone on strike twice prior to the major strike that we shall discuss now; the first strike took place between 16.6.'38 and 20.7.'38 followed by another strike between 9.2.'39 and 11.2.'39 and on both the occasions, the central demand was asking for permanent status to the more than 850 temporary workers. On

89. Ibid

90. Report for week ending 31.1.1939. G.O. 297, dtd. 8.2.1940, Development Dept. (TNA)
both the occasions, the strike was called off by the Union on
the assurance by the Minister for Industries and Labour that
the matter will be looked into amicably after hearing from
the Directors of the concern from Bombay. 91 In fact, on the
occasion of the second strike, the Minister for Labour
assured the workers "...that he would give them a reply
within 10 days. On this basis, the workers resumed work." 92
On the 22nd February, 1939, as required by him, "the
representatives of the employees met Mr. Giri at the
secretariat. They were informed by the Minister that the
Bombay proprietors had written to him that the demands of the
workers could not be granted owing to some financial
difficulties." 93

The Madras Labour Union for Textile Workers responded
to this by sending a strike notice on 22.4.39 placing among
other things the following demands:

1. The temporary men, working on lower wages and with
none of the privileges of the permanent men (though the
quality of the work and hours etc. are precisely the same
for both the classes) should be placed on the same level as

Presidency for the years 1938 and 1939.

92. Report for week ending 17.2.1939. G.0.297, dtd.
8.2.1940, Development Dept. (TNA)

93. Indian Express (Madras), 29.2.1939. in G.0. 1327 dtd.
22.5.1939, Development Dept. (TNA)
the latter, with the same wages and other privileges.

2. The wages attached to a permanent vacancy should be paid to the workman, temporary or permanent when he works in the vacancy.

3. A general increase in wages of those earning below Rs.20/- a month be effected. 94

The strike commenced on the morning of 23.2.39 when "The entire body of workers, ... numbering nearly 2700, struck work ... The management closed the mills for the present and the police ... keeping a watch at the mill's premises." 95 The events that followed, merit far greater attention than perhaps any of the other strikes in the Province. The workers resorted to picketing the mill gates and on the first day of the strike itself, "Ten workers who stationed themselves in front of the mill's gate ... were arrested on a charge of having prevented some of the employees from entering the mills. They were charged under Section 341 I.P.C. and Sec. 75 & 71 Clause II of the City Police Act." 96 The management of the mills in this connection issued a statement on the same day accusing that,

Picketing of an aggressive kind is being practiced

94. Letter from the General Secretary, Madras Labour Union to the Commissioner of Labour dtd. 22.2.1939. Ibid
95. The Hindu, (Madras) 23.2.1939.
96. Ibid
near the mill gates and on the road corners whereby all office work is prevented by stopping the merchants, clerks and peons... The condition is as fraught with danger as stay-in-strikes which were condemned by the Government recently. 97

This was definitely an exhortation to the Government to act and the cue was taken in its spirit and "... The total number of men arrested in connection with picketing upto 27.2.39 was 104..." 98

While the arrests of picketers were discontinued from 28.2.39, the Government issued a Press Communique on the 5th March 1939, stating that,

It is unfortunate that the Choolai Mill workmen have gone on strike. It is necessary that the public as well as all parties concerned should know that the Government had done all that they possibly can to prevent this strike... The Government cannot but regret the action of the workers in stopping work and going on strike... 99

97. Ibid

98. Report for week ending 3.3.1939. G.0.297, dtd. 8.2.1940, Development Dept. (TNA)

99. Press Communique issued by the Ministry of Public Information, Government of Madras, dtd. 5.3.1939 G.0. 1327, dtd. 22.5.1939, Development Dept. (TNA)
The full text of the Communique and the response to it by the Labour Union and other texts in that connection is provided in an appendix to this thesis (appendix-2). Suffice it to say that the Government had straightway sided against the workers, in an issue relating to natural justice - i.e. 'equal pay for equal work'; an extremely reasonable demand. This act by the Government provoked widespread criticism and even a relatively independent journal, The Vinodhan, stated that, "The situation is such that the workers have to conclude that, though it is the Congress Ministry that is now in power, this Ministry too is as obstinate as its predecessors." 100

Under these circumstances, the management announced in the beginning of March their decision to "...close down the mill and wind up business..." 101 This however was taken by the striking workers with a note of confidence who expected the Government to take over the running of the mills. This was followed by "... vigorous propaganda by the Congress among the workers. At a well attended Public meeting held by the Madras Labour Union with Sri T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, as the President, resolutions were

100. The Vinodhan (Tamil Paper) of 4.3.1939. Ibid.
101. Ibid
passed expressing confidence in the ministry.102

These hopes however were dismayed by the Ministry and in fact the attitude of the Premier was explicitly clear, when he wrote to Mr. V.V. Giri as follows:

It is better to get a definite communication from the Choolai Mills management, whether they have decided to close up their business. It would be useful to inform the general public and the labourers that there is no more use in agitation and that the strikers can go home or find other employment instead of carrying on demonstrations.103

The Mill's finally closed down on 8th May 1939 and under the very nose of the Congress Ministry, more than 2700 workers were sent 'home or find other employment' with no means "to save (themselves and their children) from starvation and death."104 This was not all and the contempt to the cause of workers shown by the ministry excelled all previous levels when,

... The Madras Corporation voted a grant of Rs.5,000/- as a gift to the labourers who were thrown

102. Report by the D.M. Madras dtd. 5.5.1939. Ibid

103. Letter from Rajagopalachary to V.V. Giri dtd. 4.4.1939. G.O. 1327, dtd. 22.5.1939, Development Dept. (TNA)

104. Extract from the Memorial signed by the Workers addressed to the Governor of Madras dtd. 29.11.1939. Ibid (See appendix 2 for the full text of the memorial, which is quite revealing in itself).
out of work and their families. But the Government vetoed it. This pleased the Governor so much that he remarked that the ministers were beginning to realise that a firmer stand had to be taken in regard to the extreme demand of the labourers and their unions in the Presidency. 105

CONCLUSIONS

This now brings us to a conclusion of a long story explaining the attitude of the Congress Ministry in the Province in the course of various strikes. Let us now look at the reactions to these from the various quarters of political opinion in the province.

The policy of the Government towards labour had come under criticism from members of the Congress party itself especially the left wingers as is evident from a letter from Pt. J.L. Nehru to Rajaji in which the former stated as follows:

... I am entirely opposed to lightning strikes and to strikes which take place before grievances are formulated and put forward... There is a fairly widespread impression among the AICC members and

Congressmen that in some respects, the Madras Governments' general policy has not been in consonance with the declared policy of the Congress...

This reaction had continued without much change, and in fact had intensified in magnitude towards the end of the period as is evident from a letter from G. Krishnamurthy, (M.L.A. elected from Congress platform to the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1937 from the Railway Trade Union Constituency) the General Secretary of the Madras and South Mahrata Railway Employees Union, to the Premier of Madras when he wrote as follows:

I am constrained to say to you that I am not at all satisfied with the policy followed by our Government with regard to labour questions. The recent shooting down of unarmed workers at Chittivalasa by the police is an eye-opener... the series of strikes, Courts of Inquiries appointed by the Hon. Minister for Labour is inexcusable. It should have been very easy to bring in suitable legislation to tackle with labour disputes by compulsory arbitration and to strengthen effectively the Trade Union Movement with a view to

106. Letter from J.L. Nehru to V.V. Giri, dated 16.11.37 CR Papers, File No.9, Reel No.5, Acc. No.1422, (NAI)
safeguard the interests of the workers who are today at the mercy of the employers... The Government acts more like the Executive Council of the employers than like an impartial arbitrator between the two opposing interests... The Chirala shooting... the Chittivalasa massacre - these seem to be non-violence on the part of the police... 107

Thus to conclude, we may state that the period when the Congress party was at the helm of affairs in the Madras Presidency, working class protests were met with repressive measures of as much intensity as the imperialist rulers in the past. The Congress Ministry did not hesitate to use the dreaded provisions of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in suppressing the activities of the Communist trade unionists. Lathicharges and prohibition orders under Section 144 Cr. P.C. were used in almost every instance of a drawn out strike. It has been seen that the Government used the provisions of law in all but one instance (Madura Mills dispute) against the interest of the working class. In other words, the period when the Congress Ministry held office, the expectations of the working class were belied.