The consolidation of the working class in terms of their organised protest actions in the form of strikes in response to the impact of the war witnessed the entry of the hitherto docile groups such as the scavenging staff in the municipalities, those in industries such as Food, Drink and Tobacco, etc., into the working class movements as seen in the previous chapter. The cessation of hostilities and the defeat of the Nazi forces in its course let loose a process wherein, the hold of the colonial powers was weakened leading to the strengthening of National Liberation forces the world over. In India, this current began to sweep the country and it was epitomised in the revolt by the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy in February 1946 wherein, even at the time of surrender, the President of the strike committee declared "We surrender to India and not to Britain."\(^1\)

This period witnessed an all-time high in the number of strikes and the man-days lost (with 848 strikes reported in 1945 accounting for the loss of 3,340,000 mandays) throughout the country. This was again a period when the spirit of anti-imperialism had reached a high watermark, in both qualitative as well as quantitative terms. While a detailed discussion on these

aspects will be done in the following chapter, at the outset, it will be proper to state that in the sphere of the working class protests, this phase manifest in clear terms, the internal dynamics of the anti-imperialist struggle culminating in the founding of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, (INTUC), splitting the ranks of the AITUC.

The background to this second, but decisive split after the apparent unity achieved between the AITUC and the NTUF shall be discussed in the following chapter, but it should be pertinent and in many ways essential to state here that this second split, was in consonance to the line that was adopted by the AICC in December, 1945 to expel all Communists from the Congress Party. This was clearly a reflection of the process wherein "The various political forces in the National life defined themselves in a more clear cut fashion than before."2 It is essential to bear in mind this overall political context of what we may call the last and decisive phase of the working class anti-imperialist protest.

This chapter will explain why we may call it the last and decisive phase by attempting a brief survey of the nature of the demands, followed by a section on a contextual

analysis and conclude with a section on the response of the State to these struggles.

Section 1: Post-War Strikes - An Overview

As in the case of the previous phase (1939-1945), this phase in the world of labour witnessed a severe deterioration in the standard of living evident from the data provided in Chapter 1 of this thesis. Despite the fact that money wages in the two major industries (Textile and Engineering) of the Presidency showed an increasing trend from 1942 onwards due to the wartime measures of bonus and dearness allowance, it is evident that it was disproportionate with the increase in prices. This, however, was compounded by the shortage of essential commodities, accompanied by black marketing and hoarding, for which we do not have any data base to calculate. Yet another important aspect that the working class had to reckon with, at this crucial stage was that of unprecedented retrenchment brought out by the obvious fall in war time demands. The All India Employment Index Number that had registered an increase from 100 in 1939 to 151 in 1945, fell to 133 and 130 in 1946 and 1947 respectively; (as seen in Table 1.7 in chapter-1). The experience in Madras Presidency was on similar lines as is evident from Table 1.2, where the daily average number of workers employed in the Presidency had risen from about 1,82,000 in 1939 to 2,83,000 in 1945 and in 1946 fell to
2,32,000. In other words, more than 50,000 workers or about 18 per cent of the total workforce were thrown out of jobs, by the end of 1946.

This process accompanied by the ongoing political ferment had resulted, in the words of the Director Intelligence Bureau,

"... the labour situation (is) becoming increasingly dangerous and there are no signs that it may fall at some future date and with a continued deterioration in the law and order position, heavily, under communist and Congress-left-wing influence." 3

Let us now look into some aspects of the nature of the strikes before entering into a detailed discussion of the same.

Table 5.1: Incidence of Strikes-Industrywise-Madras
Presidency - September 1945 - August 1947

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>1945</th>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>Total for all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays lost</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2,66,496</td>
<td>14,45,852</td>
<td>17,14,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering (inc. Rly. Workshops)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays lost</td>
<td>30,120</td>
<td>80,773</td>
<td>33,199</td>
<td>1,44,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food, Drinks &amp; Tobacco</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays lost</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12,891</td>
<td>40,070</td>
<td>52,961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays lost</td>
<td>6,278</td>
<td>67,156</td>
<td>2,92,551</td>
<td>3,65,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of all Industries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Mandays lost</td>
<td>36,430</td>
<td>4,29,316</td>
<td>16,11,672</td>
<td>22,77,418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident from the data in Table 5.1 that the strikes were fairly widespread in general throughout the

period of our concern. In specific terms, the strikes were most intense in the Textile industry, accounting for a loss of 75 per cent of the mandays lost during the period, followed by Engineering industry with a loss of about 17 lakhs or 6 per cent of the total mandays lost.

Another important aspect, evident from the data in table 5.1 as well as similar data in the two previous chapters is the fact that the year 1947 (figures relate only upto August 1947) registered an all time high in the number of mandays lost, accounting for about 80 per cent of the total mandays lost during this phase (post-war years) of the struggle. It should be interesting here again, that strikes in the Textile industry alone accounted for 80 per cent of the total mandays lost in this year. The trend remained the same during the entire period and with this, we can safely conclude that as in the case of the previous phase, the Post-War era in the Presidency witnessed stormy protests in the changed situation, especially in the case of the textile centres of Madras, Coimbatore, Madurai and Tinnevely. This, however, was accompanied by the involvement of those in other industries and it is to be noted here that the data in table 5.1 does not include the massive strike that took place on the lines of the South Indian Railway, centered at Goldenrock in Trichy District and spread over the Presidency. A detailed discussion of few of the important strikes will be attempted in the following section.
Let us now look at the causes that led to the various strikes during our period from the following table (5.2).

Table 5.2 Causes of Disputes - Industrywise - Madras

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes</th>
<th>1945</th>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wages, Bonus, D.A., War Allowance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays Lost</td>
<td>5,968</td>
<td>1,84,853</td>
<td>15,99,241</td>
<td>17,89,862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suspension Dismissals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays Lost</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>49,533</td>
<td>74,194</td>
<td>1,23,743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leave/Holidays</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays Lost</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>9,431</td>
<td>2,780</td>
<td>12,374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discharge/Retrenchments</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays Lost</td>
<td>9,016</td>
<td>5,836</td>
<td>47,637</td>
<td>62,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others (incl. working-conditions, illtreatment sympathy strikes, etc.)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Strikes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays Lost</td>
<td>21,267</td>
<td>1,79,863</td>
<td>87,820</td>
<td>2,68,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total No. of Strikes</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandays Lost</td>
<td>36,430</td>
<td>4,29,316</td>
<td>18,11,672</td>
<td>22,77,418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Ibid.
It is evident from the details in Table 5.2 that while in 1945, the question of retrenchment/discharge had accounted for two strikes and a loss of about 9,000 or 25 per cent of the mandays lost in the year (between September and December 1945), in the years that followed, the question related to wages had dominated the area of working class protest. It should be noted here in this context that the question related to wages had singularly dominated other issues accounting for a loss of about 17 lakhs mandays or 78 per cent of the mandays lost during the period between the end of the war and the declaration of independence. The next most important factor was retrenchment of labour during this phase.

It should be pertinent in this context to note the following figures showing the intensity of retrenchment in the two major industries of the Province namely Textile and Engineering: from the figures available in Table 1.2 in Chapter I, it is evident that the Textile industry alone threw out of jobs about 3500 men/women and an equal number were rendered jobless in the Engineering industry accounting for a retrenchment of about 3 per cent of the working population. The impact of this factor, in the context of deteriorating living standards, as has been explained in Chapter I should be borne in mind while analysing the causes of the strikes. Hence, notwithstanding the fact that the question of wages had dominated the terrain of working class
protests in the Presidency, this should be considered in the context of falling opportunities of employment, accompanied by the ongoing political ferment against imperialism. This aspect can be explained at the outset, with a reference to the fact that the years 1946 & 1947 witnessed 24 and 16 strikes respectively which were classified as sympathy strikes. This shows a new quality of working class solidarity which motivated workers to strike work not just to meet their own demands and to redress their own grievances, but also in defence of workers elsewhere under other employers. This is significant. The mandays lost in 1946 on this account was about 68,000 or 16 per cent of the loss in the year.6

Thus, to conclude this section, we may state that the deteriorating standard of living caused by disproportionate wages vis-a-vis prices and compounded by retrenchment of labour and shortage of commodities which had its genesis in the war caused the final wave of struggle in the Province.

SECTION - 2 A STUDY OF THREE MAJOR STRIKE ACTIONS

The concrete objective situation in which the working class had been drawn into during the last stages of the war

was one of misery in both political as well as economic sense.

This was explained in the following terms by the 21st session of the AITUC at Madras in January, 1945:

\[\text{The cost of living rose to more than 200 per cent on the average. Compensation as dearness allowance, granted to industrial workers, in most cases after severe struggles, has been meagre in proportion to the rise in the cost of living. In the industrial field, despite the surface appearance of comparative quiet, mainly induced by the operation of D.I.A. Rule 81(A) and the reluctance of trade unions to undertake the responsibility of a strike a seething discontent has formulated itself...}^7\]

The cessation of hostilities along with the political will of the organisation of the working class, the AITUC, to "...make a great and concerted effort, not merely to secure a temporary allowance, but to secure permanent increases in the basic rates of wages"\(^8\) with resort to strikes, led to the radicalisation of the working class throughout the country as has been seen in the previous section.

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8. Ibid.
Let us now look closely into some of the more important strikes of the period, within the context explained above, such as the heroic struggles fought by the scavenging staff of Madras Corporation, the South Indian Railwaymen, the Textile workers of Coimbatore and the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills at Madras City. While the first three strikes took place between August and November 1946, the one at B&C Mills was spread over a long period between March and June 1947. It is interesting to note at this stage, that all these strikes had taken place after "....the proclamation under section 93 was revoked (on the 30th of April, 1946) and Sri Prakasam and nine of his colleagues were sworn in on the same day". In other words, they took place under the Popular Ministry in the Province, as well as the formation of the Interim Government at the Centre later on. The relevance of this, will be discussed in detail in the next section as well as in the next chapter, but it is pertinent to take note of this at this stage of the discussion.

MUNICIPAL STRIKE

The strike wave showed no signs of abating throughout the Province and it was in this context that "The Madras

Corporation Labour Union (Communist Controlled) launched on a strike on 13.8.46 involving over 2,000 sweepers and scavengers. The strike took place after the failure of a prolonged course of negotiations between the Madras Corporation Labour Union (Red Flag) and the corporation officials over the following demands placed by the Union:

1. Rs.35 and Rs.30 as basic wages for men and women respectively;
2. Rs.21 as dearness allowance for all;
3. Rs.5 for house allowance;
4. Rs.5 as unclean allowance; and
5. facility for leave, etc.

While during the negotiations that spread over a span of 7 months, "the union offered to accept an interim adjustment amounting to an increase of Rs.5 in basic pay, Rs.2 in house allowance and Rs.5 in dearness allowance, provided their demands were referred to adjudication, ... insolently the Commissioner offered them only Rs.2 more by way of wages" and it was this that led to the strike. The course of the strike was marked by bloody repression witnessing the invoking of the hated Criminal Tribes Act in the city and the employing of substitute labour to break the


12. Ibid.
strike. This will be discussed in detail in the following section of this chapter.

This however was the first of the major strikes that broke out in the Province, accompanied by a similar action in Andhra in one of the best organised strikes ... in Andhra. The 10,000 Municipal workers of more than 28 places formulated their common demands and elected a central committee. All struck on the same day and fought strenuously winning substantial gains despite heavy odds and severest repression by the Prakasam Ministry. 13

Yet another aspect of striking importance, in the context of the Madras Municipal-labour strike was the fact that "By organising a one day general strike in protest the Madras working class successfully intervened in favour of the Municipal workers, thereby strengthening working class solidarity all the more." 14 This prolonged strike had also spelt out the obvious attitude of the 'Popular Ministry' (to be discussed later) and following closely on its heels, a general strike broke out on the lines of the South Indian

Railway from midnight of 24th August, 1946. Let us examine the details of this strike before we proceed further.

S.1. RAILWAY STRIKE

Though the strike began on 24th August 1946 throughout the lines, the prelude to this was laid from an earlier date in conformity to the decision of the All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) for an All India General strike when "the Railwaymen held strike ballots which revealed an overwhelming majority in favour of strikes."16 This proposed strike from 27th of June, 1946, however, was called off by the AIRF, before it had begun and in conformity with this decision, the Railwaymen's Union of M & SMR and SIR withdrew the strike notices, the latter did this only at the last moment thus keeping the authorities in suspense.17

The withdrawal of the strike notice by the AIRF was on the basis of an agreement reached with the Railway Board to the effect, of an Interim Relief till the constitution of a Central Pay Commission and other monetary concessions including the payment of the dearness allowance which was


17. Fortnightly Reports, II half of June, 1946. F.No. 18/6/46, Home Political, (NAI).
introduced on January 1st, 1945 and to appoint an adjudicator concerning leave regulation and hours of work. The withdrawal of the strike notice however was not a unanimous opinion of the General Council of AIRF and the reservations in general had come from the Communist sections of the Council and of specific relevance to us was the note of dissent given by M. Kalyanasundaram, president of SIRLU, along with the representatives of the unions of the G.I.P. Railway, BB&C Railway, B & A Railway and the N.W. Railway, wherein they stated that:

The battle is not yet over. It is only suspended. The question of retrenchment of three lakhs; the question of revision of scales of pay are yet to be settled. They can be decided in our favour only if the Board and the Government know that the ten lakhs are ever ready to give a fight if the demands are not granted. We call upon the workers therefore to utilise the coming six months... strengthening themselves and marking those leaders who are afraid of strikes. 19

The 'six months' period, seemed to be taken by the administration of S.I.R. for its own preparation for the

18. People's Age, Bombay, 30th June, 1946.
19. Ibid.
offensive and suspension orders were served on certain individual activists of the union in the Goldenrock Workshop to which the workers responded by means of:

A stay-in-strike in the Goldenrock workshops from 23rd July, 1946, as the administration had not considered favourably certain issues such as the restoration of a certain clause in the Discipline and Appeal Rules; the reinstatement of six discharged men, three from the workshops and three from other departments; the cancellation of the suspension orders pending in the workshops; the review of all cases of punishments meted out since May 1946; ... grant of wages and dearness allowance for the previous strike period (May 1946).20

The response of the administration to this was an undeclared lock-out when the General Manager of S.I.R., issued a notice on 29th July, 1946 stating that "... from Thursday, the 1st August, 1946, only those workmen who have been actually working at their jobs during these days, will be permitted to go into the workshops. To enable these men to be identified at the gates, admission cards will be issued to them by the

Foremen of the shops concerned on ... the 31st July 1946. "21

The SIRLU leadership while condemning this action by the administration resorted to a peaceful picketing of the Workshop gate and on the 2nd August, 1946, 'The number attending work were about 100, mostly foremen, Chargemen and a few Anglo-Indian labourers. ... The strikers (had) succeeded in closing down the workshops and offices in Goldenrock for all practical purposes.' "22 It was at this stage that the SIRLU issued a strike notice to the administration on 1st August 1946 followed suit by the S.I.R. Station Master's Association.

The General Strike commenced from midnight of 24th August, 1946, and as a preventive measure to avoid the apprehended trouble, the S.I.R. administration canceled all trains from the previous evening. "23 The strike carried on and it was not before the end of August, that the Railway administration could run some passenger trains, and on the


whole traffic was restricted to daylight hours only. 24 This had continued throughout the period of the strike until it was called-off by the labour union on the 23rd September, 1946 and normal running of trains was resumed from the morning of 24.9.40. 25

The decision for the withdrawal of the strike was taken by the Joint Strike Committee which met under the initiative of S. Gurusamy, the General Secretary of A.I.R.F. "in deference to the advice given by the Railway Member in the Interim Government and his personal assurance ... that there would be no victimisation and that all legitimate grievances would be sympathetically considered." 26

This however explains a minor part of the strike. The attitude shown by the Government at the Provincial as well as the newly formed Interim Government to the strike requires to be discussed in detail. While it will be pertinent to do this in the next section, to put it in brief terms at this stage, we may safely agree that the strike which was fought under the leadership of the Communist led SIRLU,

And for all those 29 days, it was fought jointly by the Popular Ministry with its savage repression and

24. Ibid.

25. Statement for fortnight ending 30 September 1946. Ibid.

the white Railway Administration with its black legs. And of course, the Congress 'Labour' leaders helped. 27

The strike in S.I.R. witnessed massive repression in the Goldenrock Railway Colony area which reached its highest mark on 5th September 1946 when there was the first firing on workers in the country since the Interim Ministry assumed office. Before we discuss this in detail, let us now look at another strike that took place in the Textile industries of Coimbatore in November 1946, accounting for a loss of more than 22,000 mandays. 28

COIMBATORE MILL STRIKE

The workers in the Coimbatore Textile industry had been agitating from the beginning of 1946 on a variety of causes ranging from working conditions to suspension/dismissals. It is to be noted that in 1946, Coimbatore district alone accounted for the loss of more than 1 lakh mandays or 25 per cent of the mandays lost in the Presidency for the year as is evident from Table-5.1. The relative lull that appeared in the labour offensive in October when "...The strike wave in the Province appeared to

27. Ibid.

have spent itself”,

revived by November 1946 when "There (was) evidence of a revival of labour unrest... The MPTC issued instructions to workers asking them to hold strike ballots on several issues,..." \(^{30}\)

The strike ballot was taken by the Red flag union on the following demands; \(^{31}\)

1. An interim increase in wages of Rs.15 for workers and Rs.20 for clerks;
2. Six months' bonus;
3. Stoppage of victimisation and lockouts; and
4. Joint Production Committees inside the mills to check black-marketing.

While the workers responded to this with an overwhelming support to the strike, the mill-owners' resorted to "...Lockouts in seven mills in Singanallur in addition to four lockouts in Stanes Mill (Coimbatore Town) Seventy seven workers have been victimised during this period." \(^{32}\)

The demand by the Red flag union was to lift the lockout in the Stanes Mill (CS&W Mills) and put forward to

\(^{29}\) Fortnightly Report, 1 half of October, 1946. F.No.18/10/46, Home Political (NAI).

\(^{30}\) Fortnightly Report, 1 half of November, 1946. F.No. 18/11/46, Home Political (NAI).

\(^{31}\) People's Age, Bombay, 24th November, 1946.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
the conciliation officer that, "... recruitment to the mills be made at the mill gates with preference for existing mill hands" was interpreted as "... the insistence of the communists on interfering with the manager's right to recruit whom he pleases, (rendering), conciliation almost impossible." The management announced re-opening of the mills on 1st November 1946 and thus rejected the demands of the Union summarily. The mills were run with a depleted workforce of "about 150 imported black legs and goondas, ... from outlying villages in lorries... under Police escort." The workers resorted to picketing the mill gates on the 11th November and blocked the passage to the mills, which was followed by incidents of lathicharge and even firing killing at least 12 workers and a score of others injured.

While it is difficult to call this event as part of a strike action by the workers, we need to look at this in detail as an event wherein the working class stood in front of the police brutality with an unflinching conviction in defence of their rights. The week that followed also witnessed strikes in six other mills, involving about 8500 workers and accounting for a loss of about 60,000 mandays.

33. Ibid.
35. People's Age, Bombay, 24th November, 1946.
In short we may agree with saying that;

"... November 11 saw at Coimbatore not only police butchery of the ghastliest type. It saw equally unprecedented heroism on the part of the working class..."\(^{37}\)

A fuller discussion of this will be done in the following section before which, we may look at another important strike of the period, in the B&C Mills, Madras between 11th March and 19th June 1947, accounting for a loss of about 12 lakh mandays or 66 per cent of the mandays lost in the year. The demands placed by the workers during this strike were "a bonus of six months wages, increased dearness allowance, reinstatement of workers dismissed in 1942, etc."\(^{38}\) The dispute was referred to a Court of Enquiry but not before letting loose its machinery of coercion as will be seen in the following section in detail.

To conclude this section, we may state that the disputes that were witnessed during the post-war upsurge were primarily caused by demands for wage hikes and that the ideological cleavage that had inevitably worked out in the national political scenario from the previous decade had manifest itself in clear terms. The period can be characterised as one in which "The rift between the Congress

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and the left-wing elements appeared to be growing wider..."39

The revolt of the R.I.N. ratings in February 1946 as well as the trial of the I.N.A. detenus and the political ferment in which the rift was taking place shall be discussed in the following chapter but nevertheless, "Labour showed signs of growing restlessness and a tendency to strike on the slightest provocation. This appears to have been fostered in many cases by the Communists..."40 With this, let us now proceed to look at the attitude of the Provincial Ministry to labour in the context mentioned above.

SECTION - 3 STATE INTERVENTION IN LABOUR DISPUTES : AN OVERVIEW

The period under review witnessed two major events as far as the scope of this chapter is concerned; they are the formation of the Popular Ministry at the Provincial level in April 1946 followed by the accession to power of the Interim Government at the Central level in the month of September 1946. At the outset, we may begin by saying that the Prakasam Ministry at the Provincial level in Madras was a repeat of the Rajaji Ministry between 1937 and 1939; a repeat in more than one ways. As for instance "The formation of Provincial Governments responsible to the people raised hopes

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40. Fortnightly Report, 1Ind half of February, 1946. F.No. 18/2/46, Home Political (NAI).
amongst the workers, that energetic steps would be taken to end their miserable plight." The incidents that followed however were a sad story, of expectations belied and "The Government tried ruthlessly to suppress the movements, arrested thousands of workers and the police opened fire several times. A number of fatal and other casualties took place." The period under the popular ministry in the Province with the accompanying food shortage "needed strong executive and political will to be effectively tackled by a joint and planned attack on all fronts-political, economic, agricultural, industrial and social..." The post-election scenario, however, turned out to be otherwise as can be summarised in the following terms:

The growing incapacity of the Ministry to tackle either the food or industrial situations, and its sanction of the use of police against the peasants and workers, culminating in the promulgation of the Public Safety Ordinance...
Let us now look at this story in detail with regard to the strikes discussed in the previous section of this chapter. But before doing this, it will be pertinent to cite a statement by V.V. Giri, the Minister for Industries and Labour in the Prakasam Cabinet, made on the 11th May, 1946, in which he:

...advised workers against indiscriminate resort to the weapon of strikes. He advised both workers organisations and those of the employers to exploit every resource in their power to secure an internal settlement of disputes. He appealed for a spirit of discipline among the workers and also for a recognition on the part of employers that workers were not 'slaves' of the industrial system but 'freemen'.

This statement shall provide the contextual setting for further discussion on the Government's attitude to the problem of labour.

Municipal Workers Strike, Madras

As we have seen in the earlier section, this was the first of the major strikes that broke out in the presidency after the formation of the Provincial Government. The strike broke out after attempts of negotiations for 'an internal

45. *The Hindu*, (Madras), 12th May, 1946,
settlement of disputes' as suggested in the Congress Labour Minister's statement over a period of seven months broke down and in this dispute the Prakasam Ministry began by shirking away from attempting to pull up the Corporation authorities. Once the strike began on the 13th August, 1946, "... the Ministry let loose an orgy of Police Terror to break it, ... drafted the hated Malabar Special Police (MSP) in the city to terrorise the workers..." and helped in the effort "to engage substitute labour or employ voluntary workers in the performance of these essential services" and "within the first week of the strike over a hundred workers were arrested, picketers lathicharged by the police over 50 times and more than 300 men and women workers seriously wounded."48

These however were just a beginning or say a dress rehearsal to the events that followed in Madras on the 20th and the 22nd of August, 1946, when Police terror set itself newer heights. As for instance, on the 20th the area of police operations shifted from incidental clashes to planned actions in the cheris (residential slums of the scavenging staff) in Mylapore and Saidapet (which were in the suburbs of

46. People's Age, Bombay, 1st September 1946.
47. Statement on Strikes in the Madras Presidency for the fortnight ending 15 August 1946. G.O.No. 4426, dt. 28.11.1946, Development Dept. (MS) (TNA).
the city) of which the latter witnessed the worst form of police terror. On this occasion, Three vans of the Malabar Special Police, ...entered the cheris and began to beat indiscriminately ... In the course of this brutal lathicharge, a 70 year old woman succumbed to head injuries within a few hours... 49

This brutality of the police under the Popular Ministry however was not just a sad story alone and as has been mentioned in the previous section, there took place a one day general strike on the 22nd August in Madras city when "... 50,000 workers of Madras and large number of students came out of their factories, workshops and colleges ... to protest against Police terror on the corporation workers..." 50 in response to a call that was given by the M.P.T.U.C. and the A.I.S.F.

This call, was immediately followed by an order by the Police Commissioner under section 144 Cr.P.C. which "banned all processions and meetings and assembly of more than five people on that day." 51 The ban was defied at several places and there were lathicharges on more than one

49. Ibid.
50. People's Age, Bombay, 1st September, 1946.
51. The Hindu, (Madras), 23 August 1946.
occasion but all these could not prevent "nearly a hundred students and workers forcing their way into the Secretariat to demand of the Premier to lift the ban on meetings."52 This incident was followed by the worst police action ever imagined in the history of Madras Presidency when,

Within the Assembly compound and in the presence of the Ministers and M.L.As, a brutal lathicharge took place. Subbiah, a student leader of the Stanley Medical College, was singled out by the police and severely beaten up; he fell down unconscious in front of the Congress Ministers and MLAs who were witnessing the whole scene.53

The story of repression by the police machinery was complimented by the Ministry by "... promulgating the hated Criminal Tribes Act in the city, demanding of the 500 scavengers of the Kurava community daily reporting to the police station."54 This however was only a beginning and the days to come witnessed repressive measures of much larger dimensions.

S.I.R. Strike, Goldenrock

The general strike in the S.I.R. had begun on the

52. Ibid.
53. People's Age, Bombay, 1st September 1946.
24th August, 1946, but was preceded by a stay-in-strike and then a proper strike from 27th July and 1st August, 1946, respectively in the workshop at Goldenrock. Similarly, the police had begun their operation by providing protection to the loyal workers to enter the workshop and from the 8th August 1946 order were issued "... to regulate the numerous Communist Processions and meetings which were being held in various parts of Goldenrock and Trichnopoly town by bringing into force Section 30 of the Police Act." 55 Despite this the preparation for the general strike went on undaunted and when the possibility of the strike was becoming imminent, "... the Tamilnadu Provincial Congress Committee in its session passed a resolution disapproving of the strike." 56 Thus it became clear that the battle lines were drawn between the workers under the radical leadership of the S.I.R.L.U. on one side and on the other the SIR administration, ably assisted by the Prakasam Ministry. Let us now look into the details of the firing that took place in Goldenrock on the 5th September 1946, when police repression reached its height in the Presidency, incidentally four days after the assuming of charge by the Interim Government.

55. Daily report from the District Collector Trichy to the Labour Commissioner, dt. 8.8.46. G.O. No.2040, Public (Gen.), Dept. (MS), dt. 29.6.46 (TNA).

To begin with, the Ministry drafted the Malabar Special Police in Goldenrock to take "... adequate steps to maintain law and order and to protect the loyal workers and the Railway property"\(^ {57}\) from the time the general strike began. It was in this charged situation that "on the morning of September 5, the police and M.S.P. in Goldenrock "resorted to murderous firing on the SIR strikers"\(^ {58}\) in which "Five people were killed and 15 suffered injuries..."\(^ {59}\) The firing was followed by yet another round of "... lathicharge, at this stage a severe one... Injuries caused by the lathicharge were about 130 of which 30 are fairly serious, being treated as inpatients in the hospital."\(^ {60}\) It is pertinent to note that the police action as mentioned above, had taken place on the day following the ultimatum given by the General Manager to the strikers to return to work, i.e. 4th September. Another important aspect of significance in this context is the fact that the entire action—firing and lathicharge had taken place within the premises of the "Union grounds, where 2,000 workers' families lived."\(^ {61}\)

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58. *Peoples' Age*, Bombay, 15 September 1946.

59. *Fortnightly Report*, 1st half of September 1946. F.No.16/9/46, Home Political, (NA!).


61. *People's Age*, Bombay, 15 September 1946.
The police action was followed by prohibitory orders "under Sec.144 in Trichnopoly and Srirangam... curfew was imposed in the Goldenrock area.... About 150 arrests were made in that connection. K.A. Nambiar (General Secretary of the Union and M.L.A.) being one of the prominent accused in this rioting..." 62 The spate of repression continued for quite some days and to sum it up,

During the general strike on the S.I. Railway more than 1500 workers were arrested including 50 women, five were killed in police firing and hundreds were wounded in bayonet and lathicharges by the police. The building of the S.I.R. Labour Union was occupied by the Malabar Special Police and its furniture, mike, etc., were broken. The total loss due to this destruction and damage amounted to Rs.50,000. 63

The S.I.R. strike, brought to fore the hitherto apparent antagonism of the Provincial Ministry towards labour, specifically those under the leadership of the Communists. It was yet another instance when the attempt of the Labour Union to arrive at a negotiated settlement of their grievances for well over a period of 2 months was missed out


and rather than helping the workers in this by way of an intervention, the Provincial Ministry, spared no effort to suppress the worker’s right to strike. The strike, as a matter of fact was resorted to by the workers in defence of such minimum rights as "... enquiry before dismissal..." and in response the Congress Ministry of Madras resorted to firing and repression.

The story however does not end here and was followed in similar terms in Coimbatore in November, 1946.

**COIMBATORE MILL WORKERS STRIKE**

The dispute in the C.S. & W. Mills (Stanes Mills) in Coimbatore as had been seen in the previous section, was a result of the management's refusal to reinstate 16 workers who were dismissed on 'disciplinary' grounds and the rejection of the demand put forward by the union to conduct recruitment of mill hands at the mill gates with preference to old mill hands. The attempts by the Communist led Mill Worker's Union for a negotiated settlement was replied to by the management by a spate of lockouts - 4 in 1946 as seen earlier. Let us now look at the role of the police, once again under the Popular Ministry when the workers demanded for the lifting of the lockout and the incidents that followed on 11th November, 1946 after the management began to

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64. *People's Age*, Bombay, 15 September 1947.
run the mill with a depleted strength of workforce, largely recruited anew from the neighbouring villages.

The workers witnessed the running of the mills by imported labour from the 1st November 1946, but "From November 11... unable to tolerate the situation any longer, after 64 days of starvation the workers decided to resort to peaceful picketing at the mill gates." While the picketing was going on with about "...200 workers squatting in front of the gates, ... The police arrived on the scene. The squatters were moved aside and the gates were opened to let in loyal workers." This was enough to provoke the striking workers, whose ranks had by now swelled in number and they began to resist the removal of the picketers and "the D.S.P. ordered a lathicharge..." in the course of which,

A reserve police constable threw down a woman - Ammu - a worker in Kaleeswara Mills - and fixed his rifle butt on her chest. She snatched the rifle from his hands and tried to wrench herself free. Another

65. People's Age, Bombay, 24 November 1946.
67. Ibid.
constable, close by, shot Ammu dead at point blank range. 68

There ensued a physical combat between the police and the workers and "at this point, the police force went into the mill, ... and from there started firing on the unarmed workers." 69

The workers retreated, but the news of the lathicharge and the firing had spread to the neighbouring mills, and in minutes after this,

...all the workers of the Kaleeswara and Somasundara Mills, Brooke Bond Tea, etc., stopped work, came out and rushed to the rescue of their Stanes Mill brothers. 70

As the workers from the neighbouring mills were marching towards the Stanes Mills, "the Sergeant Incharge of the police force there ordered opening of fire... and crowds which had collected near the mill premises were cleared away." 71 This however was not the end of this phase of police repression and as it was done in Goldenrock after the

68. People's Age, Bombay, 24 November, 1946.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
5th September firing, "...curfew was imposed in the disturbed areas." This time, the total killed in the firing was twelve and hundreds injured. Notwithstanding this sad part of the story, it is important to note that this provoked a lot many sympathy strikes in Coimbatore town and in the mills at Tiruppur for a period of seven days as seen earlier.

This brings us towards the end of this section but before we make certain general conclusions, let us look at the events relating to the strike in B&C Mills, Madras between March and June 1947.

B&C Mills Strike, 1947

The strike was a result, as in the earlier strikes discussed already, of pending demands over a period of time. After about two months, since the strike began, the Prime Minister issued an appeal to the workers in which he "... called upon the workers to withdraw the strike and resume work immediately." While the appeal was made on the one hand, on the other hand, on 10th May, 1947, the Government "...externed from the Province, Mr. S.C.C. Anthony Pillai, the President of the Madras Labour Union and the principal organiser of the strike." The strike continued undetered

72. Ibid.
73. The Hindu, (Madras), 11 May, 1947.
not until the Government intervened again with its repressive machinery in the beginning of June, 1947; and this time it was as follows:

... Government declared the Madras Labour Union an unlawful organisation and took action against the principal office-bearers who were leading the strike. Simultaneously on the assurance of the Government of all help to maintain law and order, the management of the mills decided to reopen the Mills from the 12th of June. 75

This brought to an end the heroic struggle of more than 14,000 workers and on the 19th June, 1947 about 12,000 workers out of a total of 14,500 returned to work. 76

Government intervention in the world of labour in Madras Presidency as seen in all the major strikes was one of using the most repressive machinery. While these were instances of repression in times of specific strikes, the Government's policy of suppression of basic trade union rights reached its peak in January 1947 with;

"...the promulgation of the Madras Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance by his Excellency the Governor on


76. Ibid.
23.1.47, and the simultaneous action against top ranking communists all over the Province the same day. About 120 of the more important Communist leaders and agitators (were) arrested and detained under the ordinance and various Communist Party offices were searched.⁷⁷

The number of arrests kept increasing and in addition to that over a thousand workers were involved in 60 cases in Coimbatore, Goldenrock, Madura, Vickramasingapuram, etc.⁷⁸

The Government refused to accept the demand for enquiries into the firings and police repression in all the cases; the demand by the Communist M.L.A. in the Assembly for an enquiry into the police firing in Goldenrock on 5th September 1946, was not just rejected but the debate was availed by the Prime Minister, T. Prakasam as an opportunity "...to rebuke the Communists for their violent and disruptive activities."⁷⁹

To sum up, we may say that the Prakasam Ministry (also the Ramasamy Reddiar Ministry that assumed office in April 1947) openly sided against the workers in general and more so, when they were led by the Communists. This they did, despite their professed sympathy to the cause of labour

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⁷⁸. Letter from Tamilnadu Committee of CPI to Vallabhai Patel, Home Member, New Delhi. F.No.7/13/47, Home Political (NAI).

⁷⁹. The Hindu, (Madras), 14 September 1946.
and when the erstwhile trade unionist, V.V. Giri was the Minister for Industry and Labour. In more than one ways this was a repeat of the Rajaji Ministry in the Pre-war period as has been stated earlier in this Chapter.

However, more important, than the conclusions mentioned above, is the fact that, this was in many senses quite in conformity with the attitude of the Indian National Congress towards labour. The experience of the Popular Ministry in Madras as well as in other provinces, laid before the Indian Workers the imminent fact that was in the offing—the formation of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in the days to come. Let us discuss this in detail in the following chapter.