Interests of the working class in India began to be articulated from the last decades of the 19th century, thanks to the philanthropic concern put forth by a section of the educated social workers. These attempts at publicising the miserable conditions of life of the Indian worker and appealing to the Government for intervention to improve the plight of the 'wretched lot' had preceded the entry of the Indian National Congress in this area of activity. It should be noted at the outset that the approach of the philanthropists however, lacked a critique of the political-economy and hence, was devoid of any potential for building up a cohesive movement to be sustained by struggles.

In other words, the approach of the individuals in the 19th century was guided by a spirit of bourgeois liberal thought as it did not transgress the apparent state of labour-capital relationship and hence lacked the perspective to look into the content of the relationship and the contradiction inherent in it. In essence, the 19th century 'intellectuals' (the social reformers in general and the philanthropists in particular) failed to see the movement of history in terms of the processes of class struggle. Notwithstanding this lacuna in their perspective their role was definitely progressive in as much as they laid the foundations of the growth of trade unionism in India among the industrial working class.
It is in this context that the rise and growth of nationalist thought, grounded in the critique of colonialism as initiated by Dadabhai Naoroji and organising itself through the Indian National Congress, needs to be seen. In the context of nationalist thought in this phase, 'Economic nationalism' was added to the strand of 'Cultural nationalism' of the earlier phase. Imperialism in India, had already undergone transition from the mercantile activities to the industrial capitalist phase. Partly under European auspices and partly where Indian entrepreneurship, the growth of industries in the three major Presidencies in the last half of the 19th century was constrained by the colonial framework and thus was not in any case a capitalist growth as witnessed in Europe. Nevertheless, there took place a speedy growth in the nature of the Indian industrial working class, though they were a very small fraction of the working population. The outbreak of the first world war through its course, brought forth an understanding of imperialism, critical in its content and relatively radical in its form.

Thus, the period following the end of the World War-I witnessed a new thinking in the context of the nationalist ideology which was reflected, in the presidential address to the special session of the Congress held in September 1920, by Lala Lajpat Rai, in which he stated as follows;

It is no use blinking the fact that we are passing
through a revolutionary period... We are by instinct and tradition averse to revolutions. Traditionally we are a slow-going people; but when we decide to move we do more quickly and by rapid strides. No living organism can altogether escape revolutions in the course of its existence.¹

It is to be noted here that the period immediately preceding the session of the Congress in which the above mentioned statement was made was one of significant radicalisation of the Indian political experience; a historical juncture formed in the backdrop of the Rowlatt Act leading to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, one of the major landmarks in the history of India's struggle against imperialist control. The year also witnessed the Champaran Satyagraha, the Non-Cooperation movement, the uprising by the Moplah peasantry in Malabar and a score of other activities, which prefigured the dynamics of the struggle against imperialism in the next twenty-five years.

Apart from the distinct change in the approach of the nationalists to the struggle against imperialism as seen above, the period marked the founding of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in October 1920. While the formation of the AITUC was on the surface, caused by the necessity to

secure a nominating body for representation at the International Labour Conference at Geneva, in its spirit, it was a culmination of a process of the formation of local trade unions in various parts of the country. ²

This process of unionisation of the Indian worker should be seen in the context of two important trends of the period, viz. the growing nationalist upsurge and the worsening condition of life of the Indian working class caused by the World War I. This contextual setting of the period that gave birth to the organisation of the Indian working class is essential to be noted to conduct a meaningful discussion on the role of the working class in the movement of history. The historical setting is as much important as the actors themselves in history; as Marx had put it;

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past...

². It is noticed that the economic crisis after World War-I led to the formation of strike committees at the industry level and these localised attempts at organising the workers formed the first step in the making of the Indian working class.

To sum up, the overall background in which the working class of India and its organisation was born was therefore not a capitalist system of the European type, but a colonial economy characterised by the 'development of underdevelopment.' "...When some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs...", a consciousness is generated and in India this was shaped predominantly by colonial rule and its socio-economic manifestations. As a matter of fact, the working class of India and its consciousness was guided by both the relations of production as well as the colonial setting in which the production process was organised. A thorough understanding of this is essential for a meaningful analysis of the working class movement in India and avoid reaching at two major, equally incorrect conclusions on the role of the working class in the struggle against imperialism; namely

i) that the working class was involved in the struggle as an appendage to the multi-class movement, led by the Congress; that the attempts by forces (the Communists) to speak the language of class in the course of this struggle

meant splitting the ranks of the movement. 5

ii) that the entry of the nationalist as well as the
Communist leadership as well as their ideology amounted to
corrupting the pure unadulterated consciousness of the
subaltern groups and that these ideologies from the domain of
the elite was alien to the domain of the subaltern groups. 6

In the following chapters we shall have occasion to
question the validity of the above propositions. The aim of
this thesis is to bring out the essential dynamics of the
working class struggle. In this context, it is important to
see the founding of the AITUC as a starting point in the
struggle between the Communists and the nationalists, a
feature that continued to exert its influence over the
working class movement in India. As for instance, the first
few Indian Communists, presented a manifesto to the Ahmedabad
session of the Indian National Congress in 1921, which said,

If the Congress would lead the revolution, which is
shaking India to the very foundation, let it not put
faith in mere demonstrations and temporary wild

5. This argument is given by Bipan Chandra and some others.
(Bipan Chandra, Long Term Dynamics of the Indian
National Congress, Presidential Address, Indian History
Congress, Amritsar, 1985).

6. This is the contention of the Subaltern School of
historians such as Dipesh Chakravarty, David Arnold, etc.
(Dipesh Chakravarty, Rethinking Working Class History,
Delhi, 1989).
enthusiasm. Let it make the immediate demands of the Trade Unions its own demand; ... and the time will soon come when the Congress will not stop before any obstacle; it will be backed by the irresistible strength of the entire population consciously fighting for their material interests.  

While this demand or this perspective of looking at the working class as an essential and leading force in the struggle against imperialism was never to be accepted by the Congress, this statement of the Communists about a popular upsurge in the offing was partly true which will be evident from the following statistics on the industrial disputes from 1921 onwards.

**Details of strikes and lockouts between 1921-1946.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of strikes</th>
<th>No. of workers (ooo's)</th>
<th>No. of mandays (ooo's)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>6,984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>3,927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>5,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>8,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>12,578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>1,097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>2,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>31,047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of strikes</th>
<th>No. of workers</th>
<th>No. of mandays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>12,165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>2,261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>2,408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>1,922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>2,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>4,775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>2,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>8,982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>9,198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>4,992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>3,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>5,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>2,342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>3,447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>3,340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1466</td>
<td>1737</td>
<td>8,962</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Jan. to Sept.)

The general spurt in the activity of the working class was explained by the Viceroy in 1920 in the following terms:

There is undoubtedly a considerable amount of industrial unrest in India... The causes of the unrest are primarily economic. The pressure of high...
prices, wages have risen very considerably in the past 12 months, but not uniformly and not having kept pace with prices...

The knowledge that very large profits are being made by capitalists, mill owners in particular... The reluctance of employers to grant increase of pay till discontent with existing conditions has manifested itself in the shape of a strike....

Although strikes in India have been frequent, the unrest is largely localised and sporadic... The absence of any All-India combination of labour organisations and the trade union funds makes it comparatively difficult for labour movements of this type to be successful for prolonged period..."9

While this statement explains the features as well as the background to the strike wave that engulfed the country, it is beyond the scope of our thesis to explain this in further detail. The thesis will deal with the second strike wave, that picked up from 1937, as seen in the table given above. While this revival of the strike wave, is one of the major reasons for choosing the period between 1937 and 1947 for our study, there are a few other important aspects that

make this period an important phase in the history of Indian Trade Union movement.

It is evident from the table that the strike wave that began in 1921 showed a declining trend till 1936, except for a sharp rise in 1928. The years following 1937 witnessed a rising trend in the strikes/lockouts and the highest ever number of workers involved in the disputes, i.e. 6,47,000 was in 1937.

The revival of the economy from the effects of the depression had begun by 1934 and this brought with it, on the one hand an intensification of labour, especially in the textile industry by increasing the number of looms per worker and in the engineering industry by the introduction of 'piece work systems' in many places. Moreover, the average daily number of workers employed in various industries too registered a rise from the depression level. While attempts were made by the employers for the curtailment of labour costs in every possible way by refusing to restore the wage cuts imposed during the depression, the workers responded to this with the strike wave demanding restoration of wage cuts, for wage increases and against new forms of intensification of labour. 10 This account however will be incomplete without summarising the events that were taking place in the

realm of the anti-imperialist politics during this period.

The beginning of the effects of the depression on India was seen in 1927-28 and the working class fought militant but defensive battles against the effects. This period had also thrown up the newly emerged Communists into the mainstream politics of the national movement and the great crash in the world capitalist economy in 1929 was also accompanied by the prosecution and detainment of the leaders of the working class in the historic Meerut Conspiracy Trials. The revival of the economy saw the release of the prisoners after a prolonged trial in 1934. The years preceding the depression, in the words of R.P. Dutt was the period when,

The working class movement was advancing in the forefront of the economic and political scene. The old reformist leadership was being thrust aside. The mission of the British Trades Union Congress in 1927-28, in which imperialism had placed great hopes, had failed in its objective of securing the affiliation of the Indian Trade Union Congress to the reformist Trade Union International in Europe. 11

11. R.P. Dutt: *op. cit.* p.414. The author substantiates this point by citing from the Viceroy's speech in the Legislative Assembly in January 1929 that "the disquieting spread of Communist doctrines has been causing anxiety" and the London Times of June 14, 1928 that the interest which the British Trade Union Congress has lately taken in Indian labour conditions may be very beneficial, if it leads to the better organisation of Indian Labour Unions and the expulsion of Communist elements.
This development provoked the Public Safety Bill in 1928, which inspite of being rejected by the Legislative Assembly was proclaimed as an ordinance in 1929, with its fundamental objective to curb Communist activities in India. In this attempt to get rid of the Communists from the trade union movement the Government was not alone. They were joined in this effort by the reformist leadership of the Indian Labour Movement; this was exemplified when in May 1928, B. Shiva Rao, the Chairman of the Executive of the AITUC said that "The time has come, when the Trade Union Movement in India should weed out of its organisation mischief-makers. A warning is all the more necessary because there are certain individuals who go about preaching the gospel of strike." 

It is essential to note that it was around the same period that the Communist Party of India (which then called itself the Workers' and Peasants' Party-WPP) had spelt out its programme, vis-a-vis the labour movement as follows in a book entitled 'A Call to Action', published by the W.P.P. of Bengal in 1928,

...the task of the party is to transform the existing organisation so that it will give expression to real

12. Ibid. p.414.
13. Ibid. p.414
working class demands and to make the leadership such that it will give a courageous, militant and correct lead. 14

and identified the following problems as central to the broad struggle to be launched:

1. Eight Hour Day;
2. Abolition of child labour; and
3. Minimum living wage.

This portion of the Communist programme was quite acceptable in principle to the constitutionalist or the "moderate" trade unionists operating under the banner of the Indian National Congress as is evident from the resolution passed at the Karachi Congress in 1931, saying that,

"... In order to end the exploitation of the masses, political freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving millions. The Congress, therefore, declares that any constitution which may be agreed to on its behalf should provide, or enable the swaraj Government to provide for the following:

(i) The organisation of economic life must conform to the principle of Justice, to the end that it may secure a decent standard of living."
(ii) The state shall safeguard the interests of industrial workers and shall secure for them, by suitable legislation and in other ways, a living wage, healthy conditions of work, limited hours of labour, suitable machinery for the settlement of disputes between employers and workmen and protection against the economic consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment...15

The point in dispute, however, was the strategic understanding, i.e. regarding the means to achieve the aims. While the constitutionalists were desirous of achieving this through the principles of conciliation and co-existence of labour and capital, the Communists had spelt out a revolutionary programme based upon class struggle within the context of the ongoing struggle against imperialism,

Under the leadership of the industrial workers, the movement of the masses can go forward to abolish foreign exploitation to establish democracy and those elementary prerequisites of life which 95% of the peasants of India still lack. By means of strikes, demonstration, hartals and the more laborious means of organisation and education, the class consciousness and solidarity of the masses will be

The conclusion of the Meerut Conspiracy trials was followed by declaring the Communist Party of India illegal. The Government of India Act, 1935 with the elections announced to the Provincial Legislative Assemblies provided a scope for the Congress to go to the masses once again, after the Civil Disobedience Movement. The Congress Election manifesto among other things, spelt out the following, regarding the question of labour:

In regard to industrial workers the policy of the Congress is to secure to them a decent standard of living, hours of work and conditions of labour in conformity, as far as economic conditions in the country permit, with international standards, suitable machinery for the settlement of disputes between employers and workmen, protection against the economic consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment and the right of workers to form unions and to strike for the protection of their interests.17


At this stage, i.e. by the middle of the thirties of this century, the politics of labour had become concretised in terms of its ideology, with the two conflicting approaches outlined above. The industrial worker was confronted with these counteracting forces. It is in this background that the spurt in strike action in 1937 has to be located. This is the significance of the period chosen. Further, the last ten years of the struggle against imperialist rule, also in many ways provide the concrete background to the Congress attitude to labour in independent India.

It is necessary at this stage to examine the concept of the "working class" and then relate to the specificity of the Indian situation.

The "Working Class" in specific and the "wretched on earth" in general were opened up for historical research, by historians of Western Europe, such as Ladurie and Rude on the French Revolution, Christopher Hill, E.J. Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, John Forster and a score of others in England, who were commenting, more specifically, on the socio-economic aspects of the Industrial Revolution.

In India on the other hand, as we have said earlier, colonialism gives to the working class some specific features. The 'working class' however, has been the subject of historical research for liberal bourgeois historians,
as well, apart from those adherents of Marxist historiography mentioned above. For instance, Jonathan Zeitlin argues that the subject (labour historiography) "should be sought in its redefinition as the history of industrial relations" and in this context contests the "unquestioned identification of trade unions and labour politics with the broader working class". At the outset, I would make it clear that this thesis contests the "deterministic approach to labour institutions and movements by identifying them with the revolutionary consciousness of the working class". The paradigm of research, however, is different from that of Zeitlin. The working class will be seen in this research as a historical category, "largely determined by the productive relation into which men are born or enter involuntarily". This structural position of the working class in the capitalist production relations is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the generation of its consciousness. Any assumption to the contrary will lead to a deduction of the class consciousness to something which "ought to be" rather than to analyse what it was. This structural definition of the working class will help us to study the nature of their consciousness at specific historical junctures.

We may categorise the historiography of labour on the whole as well as in the case of India as predominantly two major approaches - the non-marxist and the marxist schools, though each of them are not homogeneous in toto. As for instance, the former school includes the chronicles of V.B. Karnik, G.K. Sharma, etc. on the one hand, whose works consistently presuppose the appropriation of the labour movement by the "dreadful adherents of the doctrine of class-struggle" (the Communists) at various instances and treat this influence of the ideology of class struggle to be alien to the interests of the workers involved. It also includes the subalternhistorians (Dipesh Chakraborty on the Calcutta Working Class, David Arnold on the Working Class of Madras) to whom both the nationalist as well as the Communist ideologies were attempts of corrupting influences on the pristine, pure, unadulterated consciousness of the subaltern groups and seek for relieving their history from the clutches of elite ideology. In effect, these two varieties, we may conclude end up treating the working class as a 'stagnant, stale lot' entrenched in the primitive levels of consciousness.

The Marxist historians on the other hand place emphasis on the evolution of working class consciousness and locate the working class movement in India in the context of the national liberation movement. An objective assessment of the struggles of the Indian working class is placed by
Chamanlal Revri when he states that,

the outstanding feature of the Indian Working Class movement both to its advantage and disadvantage, was its growth and development against the constant background of the national liberation movement and at every stage these two powerful movements acted and reacted on each other.

Yet another recent work in this framework, by Sukomol Sen, approaches the subject in more detail. A major problem in this work is that he fails to identify the central issues and thus ends up in providing only a superficial coverage of events. The main conclusions and assumptions of the author appear a bit too mechanical in its application. This criticism, however, does not negate the major conclusions drawn by the author, especially on the character of the movement. The location of a high form of 'class consciousness' by the author in almost each and every major strike is however a little difficult to accept.

Apart from the works briefly discussed above, we have a few accounts, mostly by participants in the movement, which are informative in character. A recent study by Eamon Murphy on the trade union movement among the textile workers in Madras Presidency is perhaps the only micro-level study done

on the area of this research. The thrust of this work is towards locating the problems of unity in the various unions in the four major textile centres in the Province, i.e. Madras, Madura, Coimbatore and Ambasamudram. While the author brings out certain interesting problems, especially in the context of the Congress Ministry, the work fails to consider the problem in the context of the larger dynamics of the movement.

Any worthwhile study within the limited scope allowed by a thesis of the present sort, has to be delimited to a particular section. In this, we plan to study the labour movement in the industries in Madras Presidency. The Madras Presidency in terms of both the numerical strength of industrial workforce as well as in terms of the intensity of the strikes, was next to Bengal and Bombay in that order. The features of the movement in Madras were in general similar to the form and content of the overall features of the trade union movement in India. In this thesis, we deal with specifically the two perspectives on the working class and the national liberation struggle. Aspects of culture, ideology and fame of mobilisation are not looked at in great detail.

The thesis will be divided into six chapters as follows:

Chapter I will provide a brief outline on the nature of industrial development in the Presidency and identify the more important centres of industry in terms of the workers employed; attempt at a description of the living conditions by analysing the wages, conditions of housing, hours of work, etc., in the context of the nature of industrial development and thus identify the SPHERES OF CONFLICT.

Chapter II will deal with the question of LABOUR AND THE PROVINCIAL MINISTRY. The attitude of the Congress Ministry towards labour will be analysed by looking into the nature of the strikes during the period and the pronouncements and the actions taken by the Government during the strikes followed by a section on a proposed legislation on the question of labour in the Presidency.

Chapter III consists of some detailed CASE STUDIES of strikes in Madras during the 1937-39 Congress Ministry.

Chapter IV will analyse the aspect of LABOUR AND THE WAR by looking into the nature of the strikes during this phase in the context of the changing political situation and the response of the Government by means of the repressive Defence of India Act.
Chapter V will analyse the POST-WAR DEVELOPMENTS AND LABOUR by providing a descriptive account on the strikes followed by a discussion on the final assault for freedom from British rule and the attitude of the Provincial Ministry in the Province and the Interim Government at the Central level to the problems of labour, especially in the context of some of the major strikes.

Chapter VI will discuss the question of ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND LEADERSHIP IN THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT. While the specificities of this aspect will be discussed in all the previous chapters, this chapter will deal with the overall political context, i.e. the conflicting perspectives of the representatives of the two classes in the struggle - the Congress and the Communists at the ideological plane, that guided the dynamics of the movement, so as to draw certain generalisations.