CHAPTER - IV

THE LABOUR MOVEMENTS:

1928-1934
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As stated in the previous chapter, Indian industry grew rapidly during the first world war but in 1921, it came into the grip of depression and by 1922, the whole country faced economic crisis. During this period the prices touched new height and wages of workers were not enough to compensate these high prices. This resulted in unrest among workers and a wave of strikes followed, which covered the period from 1918 to 1925.

The number of strikes in 1926 were lowest. The year 1927 was practically peaceful but towards its end, there were some serious troubles in Bombay and East Indian Railways. The workers could achieve some concessions in about one third of the strikes. The Communists played the leading role in the strikes in Bombay where they had formed a fairly large group consisting of S.A. Dange, R.S. Numbalkar, K.N. Jogalekar, S.S. Morajkar, S.V. Ghate and some others. They were able to increase their influence inside All India Trade Union Congress when Dhundiraj Thengdi was its president in 1925. In 1927, they succeeded in getting S.V. Ghate, a prominent communist, elected as one of the secretaries of All India Trade Union Congress. Their main purpose was to keep All India Trade Union Congress away from International Labour Party Organisation and British Labor Party. They were able to establish their hold on the executive of All India Trade Union Congress in Kanpur Session. During the period 1924-28, Communists had set up a Workers' and Peasants' Party, in Bombay but their most powerful union was the Girni Kamgar (Red Flag) Union.

The strikes which took place during 1927 to 1934 were based upon economic demands, but at the same time the workers also fought against victimization i.e. democratic right of association. This is evident from the increase in the number of strikes every year. There occurred 141 strikes in 1929, 148 in 1930 and 166 in 1931 in which about 100,000 workers involved themselves each year. The Communists of the Red Trade Union Congress were on the fore-front of these strikes. The influence of the Communists remained dominant even when the Meerut leadership was in the jail and had actually intensified. This fact was admitted by the Government also².

As a result of strikes during 1927-33, there occurred a big strike wave in 1934 aimed against the 'rationalisation' scheme of the mill-owners. That the wave was very intense and wide spread, could be judged from the comparative figures of 1933 and 1934. As against 146 strikes involving 164934 workers and 2168961 man-days lost in 1933, there were 159 strikes, involving 220808 workers and losing 4,775,559 man - days in 1934. The Textiles General strikes in Bombay (April to June) and in Sholapur (February to May) proved the solidarity of the workers who had developed militant leadership even under the severe repression of the government³.

The government imposed emergency banning the communist party and declaring illegal more than a dozen registered unions, several leaders of strike were arrested⁴.

As regards Congress, right from late twenties, its policy had been shifting due to emerging force of Communist ideology among its workers

and intelligensia. Congress leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and local congress leaders in some industrial centres had become followers of Socialist ideology\(^5\). Though the Communist party was declared illegal (in 1934) the Socialist, Communist and Marxist ideas continued to grow\(^6\). The Congress Socialist Party was formed in 1934 by a group of younger left nationalist elements which were equally influenced by the Marxist ideas. Its membership was conditional on the membership of Congress. Thus it formed a group within the Congress and discouraged mass membership. It was so-to-say an attempt to subordinate the independence of the working class movement to the control and discipline of the existing dominant leadership of Congress. This contradiction at the root of the Congress Socialist Party prevailed during the working class struggles and in conflicts between left wingers and right wingers of the party\(^7\).

The years 1928, 1929 and 1930 were years of much difficulty for workers. The industry at that time was facing depression which increased year after year. Under the rationalization, the Tariff Board recommended reduction of cost of production in Textile industry. The mill owners adopted new work methods and started introducing improved machinery. As a result, there were wage cuts, increase in work and unemployment. The railways and the jute mills had plans to retrench workers. This created a widespread resentment among workers followed by a number of small and big strikes during these three years.

The Communists, who had entered the labour field in 1925, were able to dominate a few old unions and even formed new unions in about two

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7. Ibid., pp. 426-427.
years' time. The Workers' and Peasants' Party formed in 1927 was controlled by a small group of Communists. From 1924 onwards, militant behaviour and Communist propaganda grew generally. Shiva Rao stated that the mill-owners of Bombay and certain agents of railway provided a strong stimulus to the growth of militant tendencies when they showed disapproval to trade union organisation and showed inclination to yield only to Communist influence. He further stated that 1928 was undoubtedly a year of great outward manifestation on the part of Communist group.

In the years 1928 and 1929, some radical economic and political content developed in labour struggles and their consciousness. There was anti-imperialist element in all the upsurges which were a combination of economic and political factors. The capitalists particularly British Jute Mill owners were making huge profits while the workers lived a life of poverty and deprivation. Real wages of Jute Textile Workers had decreased while the majority of others remained constant. The employers adopted following measures to increase their profits (a) redeployment of labour on the ground of what was euphemistically termed by the employers 'rationalization; (b) direct and open reduction of employment, i.e. retrenchment (c) abolition of Khoraki (d) increase in work load without corresponding increase in wage and (e) change in the method of calculation and payment of wages resulting in reduced wage earnings. Apart from these, there were miscellaneous grievances relating to living conditions, provident fund facilities, medical benefits, housing conditions etc. Still another important factor covering the industrial as well as political field was the campaign of employers against unionization and victimization of union activities. The limitations and

restrictive provisions in the Trade Union Act of 1926 and other legislations enacted in early and mid twenties promoted trade union work. In addition, the major factor which led to labour militancy was the upswing in the nationalist politics. Though the anti-imperialist upsurge took place in early thirties but its seeds were sown during the labour upsurge of the late twenties when the process of renewal of broad anti-imperialist movement had begun with the boycott of Simon-Commission in November, 1927.

According to K.N. Jogalekar, the basic principle of labour movement was the principle of class war and describing the concept of a strike committee, he made it clear as to how Communists regarded every strike as an episode in the ongoing class war which they were determined to organise and develop. But after some time, the Communists found their militant and revolutionary ideas as insufficient. They became more active after receiving new directives adopted at the VI world Congress held in Moscow in September, 1928. The new lines suggested that the revolution was near at hand. Aim of the strikes was to bring about this revolution. They considered the economic demands important to the extent of inciting the workers for strikes. Clashes with police were to be welcomed to awaken the revolutionary consciousness of workers.

The National movement, which was revived in 1927 after the failure of Non-Cooperation Movement, was another cause of stimulating the strikes. The national movement gained strength in the next two years influencing the trade union movement and the strikes.

11. Ibid., p. 170.
Still another cause of strikes during the period was lack of contact between workers and employers. This point has been highlighted by the Royal Commission on Labour in its report. The Bombay Textile Labour Union in its memorandum to the Royal Commission stated that many strikes could be avoided if the employers had paid proper heed to the workers' views and adopted a sympathetic attitude.\textsuperscript{12}

There was also on the part of employers a tendency to welcome strikes which provided them a natural and convenient method to reduce production.

The strike by Textile workers of Bombay in April, 1928 was the most important strike of the time. Though the strike was confined to one industry and one city, its effect was felt throughout the country and had a great influence on Trade Union Movement.\textsuperscript{13}

It was a general strike in cotton mills in Bombay city which started on April 16, 1928 involving 147,644 men. It was due to the likelihood of introduction of new systems of work and standardization in accordance with the recommendations of the Textile Tariff Board\textsuperscript{14}.

On April 15, 1928, the Bombay Mills workers' union, the Workers' and Peasant's party and the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal took out a big procession of mill-hands in Bombay city. About 1000 workers from the Kartar Chand Textile Mills went to the Mahomedbhoy and Currimbhoy Mills on April 16, 1928 and threw stones causing damage to the property. Then the workers went to several other mills and nine mills had to close down. By April 26, 1928 all mills in Bombay except two at Colaba closed down\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{12} Karnik, V.B., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 170.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{14} Mukhtar, Ahmad, \textit{Trade Unionism and Labour Disputes in India}, Bombay, 1935, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{15} Karnik V.B., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 185.
N.M. Joshi, president of the Bombay Textile Labour Union and D.R. Mayekar were, at first, not in favour of a general strike but they had to yield in view of great hold of the Workers' and Peasants' Party on Textile workers.\footnote{Mukhtar Ahmed, op.cit., p.51.}

The workers started picketing the mills. The Bombay Chronicle reported that the strikers and their leaders were jubilant for their victory in securing from the Commissioner of Police their right to picketing the mills\footnote{The Bombay Chronicle, May 9, 1928, p. 8, Col. 5.}. Picketing at the mills by men and women workers continued right through the strike. Meetings of strikers were held every day and often twice a day to keep the workers firm on their demands. In total there were seventeen demands\footnote{Karnik, V.B., op.cit., p. 186.} which were drafted by the joint strike committee\footnote{Mukhtar Ahmed, op.cit., p.53.}.

Apart from the main and minor grievances of the workers, it was sure that the primary one was the fear of unemployment created by the new methods of work introduced by Messers E.D. Sasson and company in their mills\footnote{Mukhtar Ahmed, op.cit., p.53.}. On May 16, 1928 the Mill owners' Association published the following terms on which they were prepared to re-open the mills:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Seventeen Demands were as follows: The reduction of wages shall be stopped, the hours of work shall not be raised to ten and usual overtime rates should be paid for extra work, neither millowners nor their association shall vary any of the present conditions without the sanction of the workers' Association. The rates of the new varieties shall be fixed with consent of workers' organisation. Vernacular notices showing piece work rates should be posted to every department, the system to look after their looms or the whole frame should only be introduced or continued only through workers' organisation's consultation, monthly wage which is less than Rs. 30 shall be raised, condition of work, leave and payment should be standardized. The newly introduced system should be discontinued, allowance should be consolidated with wages, one month's notice must be given before termination, employment in the weaving department should be given to depressed classes and shall not victimization of workers.
\end{itemize}
Standardized rates of wages, revised and standardized muster rolls, full ten hours work for all male operatives in all departments without any extra remuneration to which they were not entitled, where work was being done for less time previously, revised set of rules and regulations with a view to enforce stricter discipline than that which obtained in the past, fines to be credited to a workers' welfare fund and unclaimed wages to be made available when claimed; and a uniform system of calculating wages.

The joint strike committee did not accept the terms and asked the workers to continue the strike. 20

The joint strike committee sent a reply the same day that the scheme of standardization had been formulated without consulting the employees. The strike continued for six months during which time the Government as well as public leaders tried to bring about a settlement of the dispute 21.

The Times of India reported that details of Saturday's (June 9, 1928) conference between the mill owners and the deputation of the joint strike committee revealed that there was not much agreement between the two parties with regard to the grievances and demands of the strikers 22.

The mill owners planned to re-open mills in August, 1928. The Times of India reported that after well nigh four months of prolonged strike the Bombay Mill Owners Association, according to their programme, were to re-open eleven mills on Monday (August 6, 1928). The mills did open in the morning and police were fully prepared for any eventualities. But to the surprise of both the police and public, not a single striker had turned up at the mills. 23

20. Karnik, V.B., op.cit., p. 188.
22. The Times of India, June 12, 1928, p. 10, col. 6,7.
23. Ibid., August 7, 1928, p. '10, col. 6, 7.
On October 4, 1928 another conference of the representatives of both sides was arranged by the Government. A settlement was reached on the basis of the appointment of committee of enquiry by Government. The committee was to investigate and report on the standardization schemes, the standard rules and the seventeen demands of the workers. It was agreed that work should be resumed on October 6, 1928.24

A report published in the Times of India of October 12, 1928 stated that most of the mills worked on Thursday (October 11, 1928) with more than 50% of their pre-strike strength while the rest also had each not less than a third of their workers.25

Some of the seventeen demands of the workers were proved to be fair and reasonable by the enquiry committee. Most of these fair and reasonable demands were finally conceded by the mill-owners association.26 Anyhow, it was a great moral victory for the workers as the mill-owners had to recognise and entertain the representatives of the workers to discuss terms and conditions of their service. The workers and their leaders thought that they had won the struggle and were in a position to dictate terms. This however, proved to be false in the next few months that followed27. The workers did not gain any economic advantage. They were deprived of six month's wages during the strike period which amounted to Rs. 2½ Crores. The rationalization scheme which was the immediate cause of the strike, was not abandoned; it was simply postponed. The strike continued for nearly six months and about a lakh of workers were involved in it. The mandays lost were over 21 million.

25. The Times of India, October 12, 1928, p. 12, col. 4.
The Congress openly supported the agreement arrived at between the millowners and workers. The Congress under Gandhi permitted workers to live in euphoria and did not warn them about the consequences of the agreement. The Hindustan Times gave caution in its comments and lent support to the millowners without in any way opposing the workers.28

Communists entered the trade union field in 1925. In the next couple of years they brought a number of unions under their control. They established some new unions and also captured some old unions also. Early in 1927, they established the Workers' and Peasants' Party in order to co-ordinate their activities. It was directed and controlled by a small group of Communists. According to Shiva Rao, "1928 was undoubtedly, a year of great outward manifestation on the part of the communist group."29

The Communists were able to organize Workers' and Peasants' Parties at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras which accelerated the influence of communism in national politics as well as labour movement. Neither Peshawar, nor the Bolshevik Kanpur conspiracy case was able to check the tide of militant working class movement and the spread of Communist

29. Karnik, V.B., op.cit., p. 121.

Peshawar Case: In the North-West Frontier Province Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as the Frontier Gandhi, raised a corps of volunteers named "Khudai Khidmatgar" to propagate the Congress programme. When on April 23, 1930, the government laid its hand on the leaders of the Congress and the volunteers, an attempt was made to rescue them and serious rioting ensued. Armoured cars were used to terrorise the crowds.

Kanpur Conspiracy Case: As the Communist influence started growing in India, government became afraid by this. So the government did not waste time to crush it in its infancy. The British Government arrested four communist leaders - S.A. Dange, Shaukat Usmani, Muzzafar Ahmed and Das Gupta and tried them at Kanpur. They were sentenced for four years. As they were put on trial at Kanpur, the case was known as Kanpur Conspiracy Case.
ideology. The Communists in trade union movement were also very enthusiastic about the League of Oppressed Nationalities, a world forum against imperialism which was attended by none other than Jawaharlal Nehru alongwith other Indians. Needless to say, the connection with this association by the nationalists gave a new fervour to national and labour movement by throwing a new radical leadership in the Indian National Movement30. On one side Workers and Peasant parties and on the other side contact with Communist leaders abroad, helped the Communist leaders to play a vital role in the trade union movement. The 'Communist influences' writes V.B.Karnik on the policies and actions of the All India Trade Union Congress, "is clearly discernible from 1927. Their demand was for a militant and anti-imperialist line."31

The number of trade union organisations also shot up as a result of pains-taking work of the Communist youngmen. The most important amongst them was the Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag) of Bombay mill-workers, which gained tremendous strength during a period of very short span in Bombay. It became the centre of militant trade union activities of the Communists.

The rising influence of the Communists on trade union movement alarmed the government. R.P. Dutt refers to the fears of the viceroy Lord Irwin, in his speech to the Legislative Assembly in January 1929, where he said, "The disquieting spread of Communist doctrines has been causing anxiety". Besides the governments' annual report on India in 1928-29, records, "the growth of the Communist propaganda and influence especially

among the industrial classes of certain large towns caused anxiety to the authorities. 32 When the Congress under Gandhi's leadership adopted a capitulationist attitude right from Bardoli down to the Calcutta session in December, 1928, the imperialists naturally heaved a sigh of relief and at the same time decided to strike at the 'greater menace'—the rising Communists.

It is interesting to note how the imperialists assessed the relative danger posed by the Congress on the one side and the Communists and the working class on the other towards their rule. In a letter dated August 7, 1928, addressed to the Secretary to the Government of Bombay, the Commissioner of Police, Bombay commented:

"Now that the Bardoli dispute is settled—at any rate temporarily, government will be able to give more serious consideration to the mill-strikes and the activities of the Communists than has hitherto been possible." 33

The police commissioner suggested:

"Therefore, there is in my opinion only one effective way of fighting Communism here and that is for government to take upon itself the full responsibilities and arm itself with power which will permit of the arrest and detention during the pleasure of government of all Communist leaders. I believe action of this sort by government would meet with general public support." 34

This correspondence was necessitated by measures required to deal with Communist activities in India, particularly in view of tremendous working class participation in the political general strike and demonstrations against the Simon Commission as also the Communist control over the

32. Dutt, Rajni Palm, op. cit., p. 414.
33. Home Department (Political), File No. 18/XVI/28.
34. Ibid.
labour unions and working class militancy, particularly in the textile industry of Bombay. The government was considering the question of employing Bombay Regulation XXV of 1827 to deal with the Communist leaders. The government issued the Public Safety Bill in the name of public safety, which prohibited sympathetic strikes in public utility services. No wonder it ultimately decided not to lose any more time and strike at them. So the government arrested Communists and other labour leaders from all over India and launched the famous Meerut Conspiracy case.

Under this conspiracy case, in all thirty-two persons were arrested and put on trial in a small city of United Provinces like Kanpur, the government choose Meerut City because the government was afraid that, if the accused were tried in any other place where the labour movement was strong, it would be difficult for them to handle the situation according to their hopes and plans.35

Those arrested in the case were S.A. Dange, Kishori Lal Ghosti, D.R. Thendgi, S.V. Ghati, K.N. Jagalekar, H. Jhabwala, Shaukat Usmani, Muzaffar Ahmad, Philip Spratt, B.F. Bradley, M.A. Majid, S.S. Mirajkar, P.C. Joshi, A.A. Alne, G.R. Karle, Gopal Barak, G.M. Adhikari, R.S. Nimbkar, Vishva Nath Mukherji, Kidar Nath Sehgal, Radha Raman Mittra, Dharni K.Goswami, Gauri Shankar, Shamsul Huda, Shiv Nath Banerji, Gopendra Chakravarty, Sohan Singh Joshi, M.G. Desai, Ajudhya Prasad, Lakshman Rao Kadam and H.L. Hutchison. M.N. Roy was tried in absentia. Among the arrested there were the vice president, a former president and two assistant secretaries of the All India Trade Union Congress, the Secretaries of the Bombay and Bengal Provincial Trade Union Federations; all the officials of the Girni Kamgar

Union, most of those of the G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union, as well as those of a number of other unions, and the secretaries and other officials of workers. Three members of All India Congress Committee were arrested. Three of the four sentenced at Kanpur, were again on trial. Three Englishmen were also included. The arrest of the labour leaders under Meerut Conspiracy case evoked a wide scale resentment. The news of arrest of the Communists and labour leaders engendered tremendous excitement throughout India specially in Bombay where on March 21, 1929, workers in 14 textile mills suspended work in protest against the arrest. Altogether 25,000 mill hands were affected. Protest meetings were also held throughout India condemning the government for this particular policy of repression directed against the trade union movement. At Allahabad on March 21, 1929 a huge student demonstration took place specially sympathizing with P.C. Joshi, an Allahabad Law student and secretary of United Provinces Workers' and Peasants' party. A special meeting of the All India Youth League was called on March 22, 1929 at Allahabad and Jawaharlal Nehru presided over it. A resolution passed at this meeting strongly condemned the "Campaign the government has inaugurated all over the country to crush the labour."  

The Congress moved an adjournment motion in Legislative Assembly in March, 1929 to discuss the matter, The G.I.P. Railwaymen's Union's paper remarked on March 23, 1929 "we cannot too lightly set aside the new offensive that officialdom has launched against organized labour."  

Not only the radicals condemned the arrest but the moderates like M.A. Ansari, Srinivasa Iyengar, Satya Pal, Madan Mohan Malviya, M.R. Jagkar, M.A. Jinnah, G.D. Birla and others who had constituted a committee under the chairmanship of Motilal Nehru at the initiative of Jawaharlal Nehru condemned the government's action.  

Srinivasa Iyengar, K.F. Nariman and others took an active part in setting up legal defence of Meerut prisoners. Even Gandhi whose apathy to Communism was undisguised, severely criticized the arrests. While addressing a labour meeting in Bombay which was disturbed by some young communists Gandhi said, "I may tell you that I am striving my utmost to get them released, and if only you will decide to cooperate with me by creating a calm atmosphere we may be able to get all of them released." Maratha Bi-weekly Kranti predicted that by arresting and sentencing labour leaders it will never succeed.

The government had to accept the fact that it was not able to suppress the tide of Communism by putting Communists behind the bars. It admitted that after the Meerut conspiracy case, interest in Communism seemed to have practically subsided, but towards the end of last year there was a sudden revival of interest and activity. The same report adds, "The CPL now reinforced by the released Meerut Prisoners formed a temporary alliance with the Girni Kamgar Union— from then onwards Bombay (and to lesser extent, other industrial areas also) was flooded with violently worded leaflets.

40. Ibid., p. 110
41. Gandhi's speech at labour meeting; Parel, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. VI., p.299.
42. Kranti, March 25, 1929.
43. Home Department (Political), 1934, p 7/16.
urging the workers to join a 'General Strike' which would begin on or about the May 1, although the strike in Sholapur was already in progress." The same report mentions, "............................ result of spread of Communist doctrines has been the unrest it has created among labour circles generally.................. The strike referred above duly materialized in the shape of a series of labour disputes between the beginning of March and end of June................................."44. The strike in Sholapur was serious. In addition strikes of a less serious nature took place in Ahmedabad, Ajmer, Kanpur and Calcutta and in several places there was good deal of agitation. The most serious of these, however, was the general strike among the textile workers in Bombay, which began as planned, on April 23,1929. It completely paralysed the Bombay Mill industry and extended also to mills in certain other towns, notably Nagur and Delhi. This Bombay mills strike at any rate, affords an example of an attempt at 'Transforming an individual strike of the workers into a general political strike.'

As the Communists again started gathering strength, the government also became more vigilant. It envisaged not only the banning of the Communist party but all those organisations and unions affiliated to the party for example :- 1. The Young Workers' League 2. Lal Betva Girni Kamgar Union. 3. Kamgar Vangmaya Prasarak Mandai 4. The Marxist League 5. The Mill Mazdoor Union, Ahmedabad.

The government ultimately decided to ban the Communist party altogether (the Communist party was banned in 1934). Not only the government but there were indigenous forces against the rise of Communist ideology. The steady seizure of trade unions by the Communists indeed was

44. Home Department (Political) 1934, p. 7/16.
very much resented by the liberal leadership of trade union movement which was opposed tooth and nail to the Marxist ideology of class struggle and the politicization of workers under the influence of Marxist creed. 45

Nearby six months after the end of the General Strike of 1928, another general strike took place in Textile Mills of Bombay. The strike began on April 26, 1929 and over a lakh of workers of 62 Textile mills of Bombay took part in the strike. The strike lasted for about 4 months and nearly 8 million mandays were lost. 46 The cause of the strike was the dismissal of a worker of Spring Mills in the Wadia Group of Mills on March 1, 1929. The Mill committee of the Bombay Girni Kamgar Union demanded reinstatement of the worker which the management refused. The result was a lightening strike in the Wadia Group of Mills in the month of March, 1929. 47

The real point at issue appears to be that, after the lightening strike organised in the Wadia Group of Mills early in March, 1929 the mills, were re-opened in April by taking on new hands and some of the strikers and by about April 20, 1929 these mills were working at nearly full strength. As a result some 6,000 mill hands who had gone out on the lightening strike were out of employment. 48

The Bombay Girni Kamgar Union interpreted the dismissals to be the outcome of a systematic policy of victimization adopted by the management against the workers. The dismissal was also resented by the workers. A joint conference of the Millowners' Association and the joint strike committee was held on April 24, 1929. The mill-owners did not agree to dismiss the

46. Karnik, V.B., Strikes in India, p. 194.
47. Ibid., p. 194.
48. Local Government (Fortnightly) Report, Bombay, for the second half of April, 1929.
new hands employed in place of strikers. The result was that the Girni Kamgar Union declared a general strike on April 26, 1929 in all Textile Mills in Bombay.49

A report submitted by H.P. Knight, the secretary to the government of Bombay on May 1 and 4, 1929 stated that a general mill strike was declared by the Girni Kamgar Union from noon of Friday, April 26, 1929 and at the moment only 10 to 12 mills were working with very depleted numbers and there were some 1,10,000 mill hands out on strike.50

The above report of H.P. Knight further stated that the situation was peaceful up to that time but indicated the possibility of violence and communal riots. Jawahar Lal Nehru also addressed a meeting of mill-hands on the evening of April 27, 1929 but he was even more non-committal in what he said.51

The situation in June, 1929 as reported by the Acting Secretary to the government of Bombay, Home Department (Special) was that towards the end of May, 1929, 73 mills were working in Bombay city with 90,000 hands. The attendance dropped to 76,000 on June 1, 1929. On June 5, 1929, 58 mills were working with 60,500 hands but since then the attendance had been improving and on June 14, 1929, 63 mills were working with about 74,000 hands.52

The strike continued but the strikers were not as determined and enthusiastic as in the last year's strike. There were elaborate police

50. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for the second half of April, 1929.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., for the fortnight ending June 15, 1929.
arrangements in the mill area from the day the strike began. Meetings and processions were banned and several union workers were arrested. Police opened fire on a couple of occasions resulting in death of some workers.53

Local government stated, "On the 11th, the Honourable General Member granted interviews in Bombay to deputations from the Girni Kamgar Unions and the Millowner’s Association, but both parties maintained an uncompromising attitude. The General Member also saw representatives of the Indian Merchants Chamber and the share and stockbrokers' Association who offered various suggestions. He promised to place them before the government for consideration. 54

In fact the strike had begun to decline early in June, 1929. The police action was also partly responsible for the collapse of the strike. On July 3, 1929, the government established a court of enquiry under the provisions of the Trade Disputes Act. 55

"The mill strike situation continued to make slow improvement. The attendance at the mills on September 15, 1929 was 118,894 compared with 111559 on August 31, 1929. There had been no cases of assault on workers since September 2. 56 The union removed its pickets from mills from September 19, 1929 and the strike was called off. The strike ended in a complete disaster. 57 The failure of the strike was widely commented by the Press. While the Times of India found fault with the workers, 58 The

54 Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for the night ending June 15, 1929.
56 Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for First half of September, 1929.
57 Karnik V.B., op.cit., p. 198.
58 The Times of India, September 21, 1929, p. 8, col. 5.
Hindustan Times openly criticized the eruption of violence during the strike and advised management to be more vigilant in future. The local leaders of Congress supported workers though they did not assume the leadership of the strike.

There was a widespread belief in Bombay city that the strike was developing into a Communist movement. Therefore the Governor conferred with the various bodies as to the course of action to be taken and presided over a conference in which non-official bodies including the Servants of India Society and the Social Service League had been represented. The majority favoured a court of enquiry under the Trade Disputes Act. The conference as a whole was not in favour of repressive measures being adopted. The Governor then explained the measures government proposed to adopt in the light of the opinion which had been expressed. These were: 1. A court of Inquiry under the Trade Disputes Act, 2. To ask the government of India to promulgate an ordinance by the Governor General to make intimidation a cognizable offence, 3. Introduction of a Bill in the Legislative Council to prohibit unlawful picketing, 4. Prohibiting assemblies of more than 5 persons in specified area under section 144.

"Apparently as a result of the general interest aroused by the prolongation of the strike, the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee decided to show its sympathy for labour. The Bombay Provincial Congress Committee at a meeting held on the July, 4 passed a resolution placing at the disposal of its Labour Sub Committee a sum of Rs. 125 per month for 6

60. Ibid.
months for the purpose of starting a Congress Textile Labour Union in Bombay. At a meeting held on the July, 10, a further resolution was passed budgetting Rs. 50,000 for the erection of a 'Congress House' in Chin Chopokli in the mill area."62. The object of the Congress Labour Subcommittee was to organise, control and guide labour unions in all industrial disputes. The provincial committee suggested that the strike should be called off and the points at issue referred to an independent arbitration committee.

During this strike of 1929, the operations behind the scene of the Indian Capitalists and the Congress, constituted a pointer to future events. The long drawn out strike of the textile workers, immediately following the six months strike in 1928, played a major role in sharpening the ideas of the Indian capitalists. According to a labour historian, the strike was "provoked by millowners in order to give a crippling blow" to the communist led Girni Kamgar Union.63 When it became obvious that the strike was not going to peter out soon, more business organizations started pleading for arbitration by Gandhi and for declaring the Red Flag Union illegal. To the argument that the Indian interests were being threatened, the union responded "The workers know that it is they who form the 'nation' and they cannot be asked to sacrifice their own interests in favour of the nation which is supposed to be something different from them and opposed to them."64

The Bombay Provincial Congress Committee opted for a different approach. On the one hand, it promised to enlist public opinion for the cause of the workers if they returned and accepted the arbitration of Jawahar

64. The Bombay Chronicle, June 8, 1929.
Lal Nehru and Gandhi. On the other hand, it took up the organisation of its own textile union. The approval of a monthly recurring grant of Rs. 125, and refusal to grant financial assistance to the striking workers indicated the extent to which the Provincial Congress was prepared to accept an autonomous labour movement.

A general strike of textile workers' took place in Bombay in April 1934, which was the outcome of a decision of the All India Textile Workers Conference held in Bombay in January. The decision was for an All India strike but the strikes occurred in Bombay, Nagpur and Sholapur only.65

Reporting on the activities of Labour in February, 1934, in Bombay the Home Department fortnightly report said that in accordance with the resolution of All India Textile Workers' Conference passed on the January 28, 1934 the Bombay Girni Kamgar Union, the Red Girni Kamgar Union and the Young Workers' League was engaged in joint propaganda for a general strike.66

The Times of India reported on April 23, 1934 under the heading 'General Textile Strike Fiasco in Presidency' that despite determined effects of the General Strike Committee to call a General Textile strike in Bombay, the response was poor, most of the Mills starting work punctually at 7.00 a.m. on Monday (April 23, 1934). The police had made excellent arrangement to prevent any breach of the peace.67

A number of strikes had taken place in Bombay in the preceding three years. Strikes had become a usual feature in the mills. The mill-

66. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for the First half of February, 1934.
67. The Times of India, April 24, 1954, p. 9, col. 6-7.
owners had started a campaign of reducing wages and introducing labour-saving methods. Strikes were the natural reaction of workers against such attempts of mill-owners. 68

As reported in the fortnightly secret report to the Home Department, the Joint Strike Committee continued to be very active in its propaganda for a general strike of textile workers on April 23, 1934 and numerous small meetings were held which received very little support from employed workers and were chiefly attended by the unemployed on whom the strike committee were mainly relying to bring the workers out on April 23, 1934. The indications suggested poor response for a demand of general strike. 69

The strike began on April 23, 1934 and spread to all mills in a couple of days. It was a general strike but not as general as the earlier two general strikes (of 1928 and 1929). About a lakh workers were involved in it. 70

The Times of India reported on April 25, 1934 that 20 mills were closed in Bombay, over 25,000 workers were idle and there was tense atmosphere in mill area. Increasing violence and defiance of authority on the part of strikers compelled the police to disperse rowdy mobs. The police arrested 13 persons including 5 Labour leaders. 71 The demands of the strikers were: (1) No wage cuts and restoration of wage cuts effected since January, 1933 (2) No rationalization and retrenchment; (3) Unemployment benefits and maternity insurance; (4) Equal wages for equal work; (5) One month's leave with full pay every year' (6) Minimum living wage of Rs. 45 p.m. (7) No victimization of active trade union workers (8) 50% reduction in

69. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for First Half of April, 1934.
70. Karnik, V.B., op. cit., p 257.
71. The Times of India, April 25, 1934, p.11, col. 1-2.
house rent. (9). No recruitment of boys below 10; (10). Recognition of unions. (11). Consolidated wages. (12). Right of organization, speech, assembly, strike and picketing etc. (13). Well defined regulations regarding leave, abolition of fines etc. (14). Trade Union Legislation. 72

Meetings were restricted to certain places and procession regulated by government orders. Number of persons were arrested and sentenced for breach of the orders. Police opened fire at one occasion to disperse workers. The leaders of strike were arrested. 73

The fortnightly Report submitted to the Home Department stated that during the fortnight (First half of June, 1934), the situation in the Bombay mill strike had continued to improve and the attendance which was 29904 hands in 26 mills increased to 69498 in 49 working mills. Efforts of Congress to bring about a settlement were unsuccessful. Gandhi, who had sent a letter to Mody, Chairman of Mill owners' Association suggesting a settlement through arbitration, was told by him, that there was no opening for intervention of any kind. On June 14, 1934 Gandhi met the representative of the Girni Kamgar Union at Bombay and promised to do his best but gave them to understand that he did not expect to achieve any result in view of the attitude of mill-owners' association. 74

Purshotam Tricumdas, Secretary of the Labour sub-committee of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee interviewed Gandhi (who was at Bombay) and acquainted him with the textile strike in the city. The Congress attitude towards the strike had been defined by a resolution of the

73. Ibid.
74. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for First half of June, 1934.
Congress Working Committee sympathising with the labour movement and agreeing to intervene if both parties agreed to such intervention. The reactions of Congress Working Committee is significant. Moreover, leaders of Congress both of Congress High Command and Provincial leaders had tried to intervene but their efforts did not fruitify. Gandhi as usual wanted some sort of compromise between the millowners and the workers. He insisted for arbitration and made suggestions to this effect. However, the millowners rejected his formula. Gandhi found himself helpless and authorised the Congress Working Committee to pass a resolution which in reality did not bring any material change in the on-going struggle between the millowners and workers. The question one may ask is, why Gandhi was so helpless. Why he did not intervene more effectively? The failure of Civil Disobedience Movement combined with the rising tide in radical ideas were perhaps the limiting factors for Gandhi.

Some public organisations tried to settle the strike but failed owing to indifferent attitude of both parties. The strike began to decline in June and collapsed on June 20, 1934.

Local Government reported, "The Bombay mill strike situation continued to improve rapidly — and by June 23, 90811 hands were at work in 56 mills."

The Times of India also reported on June 8, 1934 that there were signs of collapse of the strike as the attendance in mills was increasing.

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75. The Times of India, June 15, 1934, p.9, col. 6-7.
77. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for Second half of June, 1934.
78. The Times of India, June 8, 1934, p.10, col. 6-7.
The Young Labour League played a leading role in the general strike. The pamphlets of this league were being regularly distributed among workers. The work to encourage political awareness among workers was the prime motive of the league.

In Ahmedabad during the period 1927-34 mill owners and workers had difference of opinion over the wage issue and both tried to solve it earnestly. When the workers were so engaged, Gandhi launched two National Satyagraha Movements in the country which greatly changed their outlook on life. They began to understand the difference between the life of slavery which they were leading and the life of independence. Gandhi's appeal filled them with enthusiasm. As such they were ready for a struggle for their cause with the mill-owners.

The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association had much faith in cooperation from Ahmedabad Millowners' Association because of its earlier support on the case of collection of union subscription. Secondly the impasse in the three months long strike in Bombay resolved on withdrawal of excise duty on textiles, had benefitted the Ahmedabad Mills. Finally, there was a hope of renewed national agitation with likelihood of demand for swadeshi manufacturers which would benefit Ahmedabad Mills. Under these conditions the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association was confident that the demand for a wage increase would be favourably considered.

So the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association put forth a demand to the Ahmedabad Mill owners Associations in August, 1929 to restore the wage cut of 1923 because the mills were then making high profits as compared

to 1923. The permanent Arbitration Board rejected the demand observing that the mills were not making enough profits.80

The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association was not able to convince the Arbitration Board that economic conditions in the industry were better. The Ahmedabad Millowners’ Association proved on the basis of Indian Tariff Board reports that profits in the industry had gone down. Then the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association put up a fresh demand for restoration of wage-cut on the ground that workers were not getting a living wage.81

The permanent arbitrators, Gandhi and Seth Mangal Das, who had agreed on earlier contention that the mills were not making enough profits, now differed in regard to the second contention. Gandhi accepted that majority of workers were not getting a living wage. Seth Mangal Das held that it was not so.82

Gandhi supported his views giving evidence from the government inquiry report into the wages and hours of labour in the Cotton Mills Industry (1923) and the report of an inquiry into the Working Class Family Budgets of Ahmedabad (1928) On this basis he worked out that average monthly expenses per family were Rs. 33.75 or Rs. 39.58 if special expenses were included against average monthly wages of Rs. 29.7. Thus he favoured restoration of wage-cut.83

Gandhi argued, 'Is the wage which the workers draw today, a living wage? If it is not sufficient for maintenance, then so long as the condition of

the mills does not so much deteriorate as would oblige them to fall back upon their capital for continuing the industry, no decrease can be affected in the wages of workers serving with inadequate remuneration. It is likely that some mills are running in loss; but a very large number does not incur loss. I would not take into consideration, against the wages of workers, such pleas, as that the Shareholders would get less interest, or that the depreciation amount could not be taken before the payment of interest or that nothing could be paid by reserves.\textsuperscript{84}

Gandhi and Seth Mangal Das then announced that owing to difference of opinion between them, the question would be referred to an umpire for final decision. They had selected Dewan Bahadur Krishanlal Mohanlal Zaveri, retired Judge, Bombay High Court as umpire. Gandhi issued an appeal to the workmen to have patience and preserve peace and that he would try to obtain decision of the umpire as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{85}

On December 4, 1929 Dewan Bahadur Krishanlal Mohanlal Zaveri gave his award after hearing both the parties. He granted increase of 5% to weavers and 8% to spinners with effect from January 1, 1930.\textsuperscript{86}

Gandhi then made an appeal to Ahmedabad Labourers as published in the Bombay Chronicle in which he said that he was aggrieved along with them because the umpire had not fully accepted their demand but they must accept it as they accepted the principle of arbitration. He expressed his satisfaction on the acceptance of the principle of living wage by the umpire.\textsuperscript{87}

Both the associations Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association and Ahmedabad Millowners' Association, even if reluctantly, accepted the award.

\textsuperscript{84} Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. XLI, pp. 360-361.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., pp. 370-371.
\textsuperscript{86} Mukhtar, Ahmed, op.cit., p. 72.
\textsuperscript{87} Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. XLII, p. 247; The Bombay Chronicle, December 10, 1929.
of the umpire by the arbitration method. Though wage cut was not restored fully, there was a partial victory. The membership of Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association increased from 11482 in January 1928 to 21874 in May, 1930.88

After the arbitration award of December, 1929, Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association and the Ahmedabad Millowners' Association co-operated with each other for another two years (1930-32). By the end of 1929, worldwide depression had started to affect India. The prices of raw material had gone down suddenly hitting severely the rural population. The rural population had to reduce their market expenditure because there was no corresponding reduction in prices of manufactured goods. This resulted in great fall in demand for textiles.89

At this juncture of economic crisis in 1930 the launching of Civil Disobedience campaign by the Indian National Congress avoided a major clash between the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association and the Ahmedabad Millowners Association. The campaign included the boycott of foreign goods which attracted the support of many mill-owners. In June 1930, the Ahmedabad Mill-owners co-sponsored the Swadeshi Sabha under an agreement signed with Gandhi. Swadeshi Sabha was an organization responsible for chalking out programme of boycott of foreign goods. They also agreed not to manufacture cloth which would compete with Khadi on handlooms.90

The change in the millowners' attitude towards the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association was also related to their own collaboration with the

88. Parikh, Manju, op.cit., p. 143.
89. Ibid., pp. 144-146.
Congress. The millowners of Ahmedabad had become conscious of the vulnerability of the textile industry to imports from Britain and became increasingly conscious of the role of the Colonial Government in sponsoring the interests of Lancashire in India. As a result of the growth and affirmation of a nationalist perspective, their alignment with the Congress became clearer. As the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association had close links with the Congress, it was strategically necessary for the mill-owners not to follow a path of confrontation with labour in the context of a growing national movement.  

The millowners forged a crucial link with the working class in the common struggle against imperialism during the Civil Disobedience Movement and in the activities of Swadeshi Sabha. The Swadeshi Sabha was set up by the mill-owners and the Congress, while propaganda activities were carried out by bands of workers of the textile industry. The ideological and political bridges that were built between millowners and the trade-union formed the context for revival of the arbitration machinery. Such a process would not have been likely had the industry not faced the problem of competition from Lancashire and depression in the market in a situation when the national movement was encouraging swadeshism. The acceptance of the arbitration machinery by the millowners gave the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association enormous popularity and strength. It was able to vindicate its stand of obtaining benefits for the workers through peaceful means and eschewing strikes. The union's active involvement in the Civil Disobedience Movement through its anti-liquor Satyagraha and boycott of foreign goods also added to its growth and power. The Ahmedabad Textile

91. Patel, Sujata, op.cit., p. 93.
Labour Association's membership increased and it was able to extend its influence over the weaving community, which had till then kept itself aloof. As a result, the prestige of the union was at its peak in this period.92

But the support of the mill-owners began to decrease for the national movement by 1933 and they developed a friendly feeling towards the Colonial Government.93

Also in early 1933, the mill-owners of Ahmedabad were thinking of reducing the wages of the workers. At the end of the first fortnight of June, 1933, the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association was awaiting a final reply from the mill-owners regarding the reduction of wages. Workers of three mills of Ahmedabad were on strike on the behest of Mazdoor Mandal Agents who were alleged to be of Communist views.94

The situation in Ahmedabad greatly improved during the second fortnight of June, 1933 as the mill-owners decided to refer the question of wage-cut to conciliation.95

The Ahmedabad Millowners' Association intimated the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association on October 14, 1933, their intention of reducing the wages by 25% with effect from the October 16, 1933. They gave the following reasons for this reduction:

1. Great Britain, America, Japan, Germany and other advanced countries had reduced their cost of production by effecting cuts or by increasing efficiency through giving more looms and spindles to a worker. If

94. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, First half of June, 1933.
95. Ibid., for the Second half of the June, 1933.
Ahmedabad lagged behind on such schemes, the industry would receive a permanent set-back inspite of protection.

2. The Ahmedabad mill industry had to compete with other Indian Centres in the provision of cloth for the whole of India, and, as others had reduced wages, a similar measure seemed called for in Ahmedabad as well.

3. A substantial fall in commodity prices had brought about a decrease in cost of living of workers.96

The Ahmedabad Labour Association demanded that mill-owners should supply detailed data regarding wages, profits, reserve funds, stocks etc.97

The situation in Ahmedabad had worsened. The dispute was now referred to the Arbitration Board consisting of Gandhi and Seth Chamanlal Parekh. If Gandhi showed inclination to support the labour union for production of confidential data of mills, then Seth Chamanlal Parekh might refuse to arbitrate. In that case, 40 mills might close down due to trade depression but in reality it was to bring pressure on the labour union. Then there would be a possibility of strike in remaining mills also.98

Seth Chamanlal Parekh contended that such private, confidential and irrelevant information could not be supplied in the interest of the industry as a whole. So, he resigned from the Conciliation Committee.99

Gandhi was fully engaged during 1934 in other activities. Therefore, Shree Subedar was appointed on the Arbitration Board to act for him for the time being.100

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96. Soman, R.J., op.cit., p.269.
97. Ibid.
98. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, First half of October, 1933.
100. Ibid., pp. 270-271.101.
The Ahmedabad Millowners' Association and the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association had arrived at an understanding but the Communist agitators were becoming more active to increase their supporters and to decrease the influence of the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Union. Their strikes were in progress at the end of the first fortnight of December, 1933.\textsuperscript{101}

The situation at Ahmedabad was still unsatisfactory. The mill-owners had not yet decided about their future action but they had the feeling that the profit margin was too low to maintain the present rate of wages. The mill-owners intended to meet shortly to discuss the question of reduction of wages. Probably they would decide a general reduction of 25\%.\textsuperscript{102}

In the beginning of April, 1934, the Mill Mazdoor Mandal along with the Communist party created some disorder at Ahmedabad which compelled enforcement of restrictive orders under the District Police Act. The Ahmedabad Mill-owners' Association and the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association sent a deputation to Patna to secure Gandhi's intervention. Two lightening strikes which occurred at Ahmedabad were intervened successfully by the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association.\textsuperscript{103}

One small strike in Ahmedabad ended successfully in favour of workers. Now the Ahmedabad millowners had prepared a balance sheet of 40 mills showing a loss of 25 lakhs in 1933 but the labour union contested it and claimed that the mills had a profit of 20 lakhs. It was reported that the millowners now did not want to resort to a wage-cut but were seeking to conciliate their workers.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for First half of December, 1933.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., for the First half of February, 1934.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., for the First half of April, 1934.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., for the First half of August, 1934.
The reconstituted Arbitration Board held as many as 15 meetings from August to October, 1934. The issues were discussed at length but the arbitrators could not come to an agreement. They decided to write their awards separately for referring to an umpire.105

The position at Ahmedabad was still uncertain. The strike at Madhubhai Mill continued throughout the first fortnight of December, 1934. Negotiations about the wage-cut had broken off between millowners and the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association. The millowners offered to reduce the cut in wages to 6½% provided certain rationalization was resorted to. The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association though agreed to the proposed cut, it insisted on the rationalization question to be treated as a separate issue.106

The situation at this stage took a new turn when the millowners decided to effect 10% cut in wages of all time workers from January 1, 1935 on which day 54 hour work-week was being introduced.107

This innovation was introduced without consulting the Labour Association and was, therefore, unconstitutional. The negotiations failed and workers got ready for a strike. A better sense, however, prevailed and both the parties met Gandhi at Delhi. A settlement was arrived at on January 13, 1935. The terms of settlement were referred to an umpire Patkar, an ex-judge of the Bombay High Court. The settlement was confirmed by the umpire by his award on January 17, 1935.108

According to the award, the monthly minimum wage of an average weaver was decided upon and the parties were suggested to involve a scheme for automatic adjustment of wages in future. The rationalization issue was also settled with the least disturbance.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, a remarkable feature of the period from 1928 to 1933 was the restoration of the arbitration machinery in disputes between capital and labour and the sanction given to these arbitration awards by millowners. By the award of 1930, the wages of the weavers and spinners, cut by 15% percent in 1923, were restored by 5 and 8 percent, respectively. This change in the mill-owners' attitude was a political and pragmatic decision. The change can no doubt be attributed also to their evolving perception of the trade union movement in Ahmedabad. The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association was more acceptable; it had desisted from mobilizing the workers on any economic demand for nearly five years, despite pressures from the workers. The Union had also not encouraged workers to use the strike as a weapon. Instead, it had restricted its activities to social welfare work, thereby avoiding any confrontation with capitalists.

Thus, it is not surprising that the textile industry experienced a minimum of stoppages in this period. For the workers, as seen during Civil Disobedience Movement, nationalist feelings were superimposed over those of class conflict. As a result, the mutuality in class relationships affirmed by Gandhi a decade earlier was institutionalized in late 1929. Thanks to the interest of capitalists in such institutionalization. They accepted the Gandhian ideology of industrial relations to suit their interests of that moment.

The same was true in relation to the Tata Iron and Steel Works, Jamshedpur. The greed and anti-labour attitude of Tata management created resentment, which led to strike in 1928. This strike which took place in April, 1928 in Tata Iron and Steel Works Jamshedpur was a big and protracted strike as a result of disputes which had been cropping up since the settlement of previous strike of 1924. The disputes were about:- The power and scope of the Joint council which was to be formed, the discharged employees particularly about G.Sethi's discharge who was the Secretary of the Labour Association, the pay scales and other demands of workers, the behaviour of American and European supervisory officers.110

The Tata Iron and Steel Company's production had been increasing since 1926. The men in the rail department were given a promise that their wages would be enhanced if they increased the production. When the production in rail department increased, the company instead of increasing the wages, resorted to retrenchment of workers.111 The Amrita Bazar Patrika reported in this connection that the rates of a good number of lower ranks had been continuously decreasing instead of increasing during the last six years.112 The Tata Iron and Steel Company was paying less to women workers and was trying to get rid of them thinking that the male workers would not support the women workers.113 The company was fully aware that the wages of the workers were low but it tried to justify it in view of the willing workers available in the area. There was surplus labour available.114

112. Amrita Bazar Patrika, April 27, 1928.
114. Ibid., p 285.
Subhash Chander Bose wrote that the workers were standing out for a living wage and that though it was alleged that labour was getting better treatment at Jamshedpur than elsewhere, the condition elsewhere were not so hard and cost of living not so high as at Jamshedpur.\textsuperscript{115}

The workers' dis-satisfaction was not only attributed to low wages. The other cause of dissatisfaction was the discriminatory behaviour of the company towards Indians and favour of Europeans. The fact was highlighted in a letter to the editor of Amrita Bazar Patrika. It stated that de-Indianisation had been set in practice in filling up higher posts and by creation of new salaried posts which caused discontentment amongst the awakened Indians. It further added that when Indians wanted increase in wages, their number is reduced to effect the saving to counteract the increase in cost but there was no saving in the cost of Europeans.\textsuperscript{116} The discrimination was not only confined to favour Europeans, the Parsees were employed in large member in preference to other Indian Communities and given higher posts because Tatas were from Parsee community. The Amrita Bazar Patrika came out with a news item that position of Parsees in Tata Iron and Steel Company was like the position of Anglo-Indians in the Railways.\textsuperscript{117}

Besides discrimination, the workers were disappointed and perturbed when they found that the company was making big profits and they were denied their legitimate share of these profits.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{115} Fortnightly Report of Political Events in Bihar and Orissa, September, 1928 also Proceeding of the Department of Industry and Labour, L-882, 1929.

\textsuperscript{116} Amrita Bazar Patrika, April 27, 1928.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., April 21, 1928

\textsuperscript{118} Bahl, Vinay, op.cit., pp. 286-287.
There arose a sense of awakening and consciousness among workers when the Tata Iron and Steel Company management helped the Government in overcoming the Bengal Nagpur Railway Strike which had clearly indicated that Tata Iron and Steel Company management was not going to tolerate any agitation in their own company. This influenced the workers to take a firm stand.\(^{119}\)

Then there was re-organisation scheme introduced by the Tata Iron and Steel Company in 1924 on the recommendation of Indian Tariff Board. The reduction of workers under re-organisation was naturally not to the liking of workers who were already suffering on account of high prices and low wages.\(^{120}\)

The problems went on increasing which necessitated visit of Gandhi at Jamshedpur. Being the representative of the workers, Gandhi was given a grand reception by the Tatas and they presented him a steel casket with a purse.\(^{121}\) but the owners could not be influenced by Gandhi. This was so, inspite of direct efforts from Labour Association and its President C.F. Andrews. However, one good result was visible i.e. Gandhi's intervention forced the Tata Management to accept and recognise the Labour Association. The management further, reinstated G.Sethi and agreed to collect the monthly subscription of the Association members from their pay roll. The concession, to say the least, was paltry. The workers did not feel gratified at this kind of help. In fact, they had hoped for solid, concrete, dogged assistance toward solid, concrete ends i.e. no retrenchment, no wage cuts and no additional workloads.\(^{122}\)

There was overstaffing in Tata Works and the Tariff Board had recommended for reduction in working costs. The company stopped filling up of vacant posts. The Labour Organisation Department tried to work on the following principles: The creation of a standard force and the relegation of surplus men to a spare gang from which vacancies would be filled until all were absorbed, the change of the basis of pay from a monthly rate to a daily rate with a temporary compensation for loss involved, standardization of wages.

The trial was a failure as the principle neither suited the management nor the workers. The Labour Organisation Department was ultimately abolished. While the workers were facing the problem of retrenchment, wage-cuts and additional work loads, the Labour Association took no interest in solving their problems. Even efforts of Gandhi and Rev. C.F. Andrews could not pacify the resentment of workers. Consequently, the dissatisfaction among workers grew enormously and the strike began on April 18, 1928.

The strike began in all the departments of the company. The demands of the workers were: General increase of pay at least 25%, graded scale with annual increments, bonus, formation of a committee of 15 workers for consultations before any man was suspended or discharged. The Labour Association disclaimed all responsibility for the strike but it assisted those men who were locked out. The dismissed workers accepted Manick Homi as their leader. On May 18, 1928 employees in works department tried one

123 Mukhtar, Ahmed, op.cit., pp 43-44.  
126 Sen, Sukomal, op.cit., p 274  
127 Mukhtar, Ahmed, op.cit., p 44.
hour hartal in sympathy with the strikers. It failed but another hartal on
May 25, 1928 was a complete success. After that meetings were held every
night attended by thousands of men with Manick Homi as their leader. 128

The strike situation as reported in the Times of India during June,
1928 was: there is a lull in the situation here. The strike leaders have called
for a day of fasting and prayer today. No further progress has been made
towards a reapproachment with the labour Association and in one mass
meeting, the workmen have reiterated their resolve to stand by Manick Homi
at all costs. 129 The dead-lock at Jamshedpur continues and for the present at
any rate there seems not the remotest hope of a settlement since both parties
to the disputes are equally determined. 130 The strike leaders organised a
demonstration yesterday evening. The real, though not the declared, object
of which was to keep up the drooping spirits of the men. 131 High hopes of a
change for the better in the strike situation were raised due to the visit of
N.B. Saklatwala, Chairman of the Board of Directors but he committed
himself to nothing. The position, therefore, is much the same as it was
before. 132 A mass meeting was called last night to consider the situation
arising out of the feeler thrown out by the company. Although criticism was
directed against the retrenchment clause and the prevailing tone was in support
of the continuance of the strike, a certain portion of the men expressed their
disappointment at having been misled by their leaders. 133

129. The Times of India, June 11, 1928, p. 9, col. 1.
130. Ibid., June 12, 1928, p. 7, col. 1, 2
131. Ibid., June 19, 1928, p. 9, col. 2.
132. Ibid., June 23, 1928, p. 18, col. 2.
133. Ibid., June 28, 1928, p. 12, col. 1, 2.
The workers formulated their demands as published in the Times of India dated July 4, 1928. These were:— Sheet mill and boiler house men and all hands discharged or reduced for the hartals or their attitude towards the strikes must be taken back and there should be no victimization, the lockout and the strike period wages must be paid, a general increment to all un canvanted employees, a general bonus to be extended to all un canvanted employees irrespective of their departments and nature of work, the minimum wages of all labour to be raised to Rs. 30/- and Rs. 20/- per month for males and females respectively, detailed departmental grievances to be settled in consultation with labour representatives, a Board comprising representatives of both labour and management to be set up to effect any general retrenchment when necessary.\(^{134}\)

On July 24, 1928 the management offered the following terms:— no man would be discharged who had been in company's service before 1920 and in case of those who had joined since 1920, preference would be given to men of longer service. No man would be discharged merely on account of his activities during the strike; the Management offered, in addition to everything offered in their earlier announcement, one month's pay for each completed year of service; for those to be re-engaged: (a) Five to six lakhs rupees would be available and would be distributed so that 75% of it would be allotted to those who drew no less than Rs. 2/- a day. Wages for all jobs would be standardised. (b) The proposal to revise the works service rules would be dropped.

These terms were rejected by Manick Homi and his followers.\(^{135}\)

The workers remained solid and continued the strike. The management did

\(^{134}\) The Times of India, July 4, 1928, p.12, col.2.
\(^{135}\) Mukhtar, Ahmed, op.cit., pp. 47-48
not yield. Thus a dead-lock persisted. Manick Homi and Labour Association requested Subhash Chander Bose to intervene. On September 3, 1928 Subhash Chander Bose began to negotiate with the company and a settlement was reached which included reinstatement of workers dismissed during the strike, a small wage increase, one month's salary as advance and no victimization of strikers. This settlement was not acceptable to all the workers.\textsuperscript{136}

Manick Homi opposed the settlement but majority of his committee accepted it. The strike committee made an unsuccessful attempt to dissolve the Labour Association and to reconstitute itself as a new association.\textsuperscript{137} Though the settlement was not liked by Manick Homi, the workers accepted it and returned to work on September 13, 1928.\textsuperscript{138}

The Times of India reported on September 14, 1928 that the protracted steel strike in the Tata works at Jamshedpur had come to an end, an agreement having been reached between Subhash Chandra Bose, President of Labour Association and the General Manager of the company.\textsuperscript{139}

In 1928 and 1929 the Calcutta Industrial workers once again acquired militant attitude. The number of man-days lost in jute industry were 15,56,808 and 32,41,153 in 1928 and 1929 respectively. These were very high as compared to 2,34,715 mandays lost in 1927. The struggles were both of economic and political nature.\textsuperscript{140}

During the four months in 1928, March to June, there were three strikes in Ludlow Jute Mills at Chengail at intervals. The first strike was of two days duration, March 8 and 9, 1928 by weavers objecting against the

\textsuperscript{136} Sen, Sukomal, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 275.
\textsuperscript{137} Bahl, Vinay, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 315.
\textsuperscript{138} Karnik, V.B., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 231.
\textsuperscript{139} The Times of India, September 14, 1928, p. 9, col. 1, 2. (F)
\textsuperscript{140} Bulletins of Indian Industries and Labour, January 1930, No.44, p.38.
misbehaviour and assault by the European Superintendent of the mills. Large number of workers were dismissed. To face this high handedness of the management, the workers decided to organize a union and invited Bengal Trade Union Federation leaders for help. By March end, they formed Chengali Jute Workers Union with Bankim Mukherjee, a Congressman and Non-Cooperator, as Secretary and Maulavi Mohabul Huq as president. The formation of the union was not to the taste of management and so it adopted a hostile attitude dismissing 100 workers who were members of the union. The quarters allotted to these workers were forcibly got vacated. The management refused to recognise the local union as well as the bigger body, the Bengal Trade Union Federation. On April 23, 1928 Kishori Lal Ghosh, the secretary of the Bengal Trade Union Federation, sent a letter to the manager. But the manager tore it to pieces and the bearer of the letter was dismissed at the spot. About 8000 workers then struck work on April 23, 1928 demanding reinstatement of dismissed workers and increase in wages.

As the management took an attitude of vengeance, the danger of violence grew. On April 28, 1928 the management tried to open the mill with the help of outside labour but the picketing by the union volunteers foiled this attempt. A number of attempts were made by the authorities to evict the striking workers with police help. On May 4, 1928, while a workers' meeting was being held, it was learnt that some of the union activists were being evicted from the mill line. A bloody scuffle took place but the eviction attempt was defeated.

141. Industry and Labour Bureau 1, 918 (23) of 1929 Weekly Review No.12, of 1928, and Intelligence Bureau Report for the Weeks ending on 14 and 23 March.
143. Intelligence Bureau Report for the week ending on May 2, 1928.
144. Ibid., for the month ending on May 2 and May 9, 1928.
Eventually the management partly conceded the demands. A small increase in wages was granted and union was recognised by the management. Workers resumed work on May 10, 1928.

A third strike took place on June 4, 1928 originated by 600 women workers who demanded increase in wages. They became violent when five women workers were assaulted by a European Assistant and four arrested on June 8, 1928. The workers clashed with the police and looted the Chengail Bazaar. The strike ended on June 27, 1928 on the guarantee that all cases would be withdrawn and there would be no victimization.

Discontent was developing amongst Jute workers for over a year which took the shape of a long drawn out strike in 1928 in the three jute mills and two cotton mills at Bauria run under the management of the Fort Gloster Mills.

Bauria, a small town near Chengail, had 18,000 Bengali labourers employed in the mills out of which 27% were Muslims. All the mills there were under the control of Kettlewell, Bullen & company which possessed 'Zamindari Right' over every inch of ground and also owned 20 villages in the area. Most of the workers were company's tenants and given patches of paddy land to make sure a steady supply of labour to the mills.

The strike lasted from July 17 to December 31, 1928 which caused the industry a loss of 1,129,358 man-days, Bankim Mukherjee, Radha Raman Mitra, Dharani Goswami, Gopan Chakravarty, Philip Spratt and other Communist and trade union leaders guided the strike.

145. Amrita Bazar Patrika, June 9, 1928
The workers were being oppressed by the 'Zamindari Right' of the Company and were not allowed during recess period to go to their homes or bazar to take meals.\textsuperscript{149} There were, however, two immediate causes of the strike, one was, the employers had decided to introduce single shift system to reduce labour cost and second was the hostile attitude of employers towards trade unionism.\textsuperscript{150}

In an appeal to the nation during the Calcutta session of the All-India Trade Union Congress in December, 1928, most of trade union leaders of Bengal, including V.V. Giri stated, "............. Suffice it to say that the Fort Gloster Ltd. is one of the concerns which pays the largest amount of dividends to their shareholders and the lowest scale of wages to the workers......... which works out at between Rs. 13 and Rs. 15 per head, is lower than the rate paid at two other jute mills under different companies only within three miles?"\textsuperscript{151}

On June 22, 1928 an incident of violence and a short strike took place due to a provocation given by the management.\textsuperscript{152} Following that incident, the Bauria workers began to hold meetings among themselves and sought help from labour leaders from Calcutta.\textsuperscript{153} Bauria Jute workers Union was formed on July 15, 1928 and on the next day five of the workers, who took an active part in organising the union, were dismissed without any reason.\textsuperscript{154} On hearing this workers got excited and approached the management with a view to plead for their comrades. The management charged the labourers

\textsuperscript{149} Mitra, Radharaman, MCC' Records, Defence Statement, pp. 11-12
\textsuperscript{150} Gupta, Ranjit Das, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 453.
\textsuperscript{151} Saha, P., \textit{op.cit.}, p 116.
\textsuperscript{152} Intelligence Bureau Report, for the week ending on June 27, 1928.
\textsuperscript{153} Amrita Bazar Patrika, July 17, 1928.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., July 17, 1928.
with lathis and then opened fire on them. Several workers were wounded, some of them seriously. This was followed by indiscriminate arrest.155

All the jute mills were closed and the strike spread to the cotton mills also. On July 26, 1928 the management announced the introduction of single shift system, although the mills in the first phase were closed by the management on their own initiative. Now the workers' strike began in earnest to fight against the single shift system. The entire labour force of Bauria complex took part in it.156

The strike ended on December 31, 1928 when the workers were completely exhausted. The strike involved 15000 workers and resulted in a loss of over 11 lakh mandays.157

It is observed that from the very beginning the Colonial Government and one of its chief coercive agencies, i.e. the police gave direct and active support to the capitalists of Bauria. Clashes took place between the strikers and police. Also terrorization on the part of police continued.158

The strike was handled by weavers and mistris at grassroot level. The strike which in the beginning was handled by moderate trade unionists, was later on, in the closing months of 1928, controlled by the Communists. In early December, 1928 it was officially reported that the strike was kept going by the efforts of the members of the Communist party.159 Nationalist leaders also took interest in Bauria Strike. On November 27, 1928 Subhash Chander Bose and on January 4, 1928 Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bauria.

155 Karnik, V.B., op.cit., p. 236; Amrita Bazar Patrika, July 17 & 18, 1928
156. Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 7 and 14, 1928.
159. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bengal, for December First half of December, 1928.
Jawahar Lal Nehru said in his appeal. "In this village and the surrounding area, is being fought a grim struggle between the poor workers in the factory and the jute kings of Bengal. For comparison the worker has hunger and semi-nudity and stark want; but the lords of jute have wealth in abundance, and their allies are the government, the police force and even the law courts. Fifteen thousand of them have carried on the struggle for six months or more. During the period they have had to face firing and arrest and lengthy trials in courts of law, which are still proceeding."

Jawahar Lal Nehru made a passionate appeal to the nation to help the striking workers of Bauria. He said, "The employers are behaving after the manner of their kind; the workers are struggling manfully with amazing courage against tremendous odds. But what of the public? What of awakened youth of country? What are they doing to help in this struggle? What have they done? It is sad, little has so far been done by them..... All those who feel that the workers in Bauria have a right on their side should not merely sympathise with them, but help them with money and with their time and energy. All those who admit the tenacity and endurance of these poor workers, should come to their aid in their moment of trials."

Though Congress leaders like Jawahar Lal Nehru and Subhash Chander Bose supported the struggle, the regional Congress leadership as a whole did not show any active interest. The fact that the provincial and local leaders did not show much concern need to be further analysed. It appears that the Congress by now had two trends vis-a-vis Labour problem. Gandhi stood for class cooperation and arbitration particularly when the millowner

160. Amrita Bazar Patrika, February 6, 1929.
161. Ibid.
was an Indian but when workers were opposing the foreign capitalist, the response of Congress was different from Gandhian worldview. The Congress leaders openly opposed the foreign capitalists and gave support to the workers. That Gandhi was not aware of it can not be believed. Perhaps, Gandhi also blessed leaders like Subhash Chander Bose and Jawahar Lal Nehru to work among the workers and help in creating anti-imperialist instance among them. However, the Gandhian strategy was to go slow and turn the Nelson's eye on all such occasions. It is on this basis that the responses of provincial and local leaders can be explained.

The prominent aspect of the strike was the determination of the half-fed and half-clad workers against the powerful jute capitalists. Amrita Bazar Patrika stated, "For the last five months and a half, the workers have fought on to assert their right of association as also their right to live like human beings, with the little money their union has been able to secure on account of subscription on the very day of the formation of the union from a few sympathisers and their fellow jute workers in other mills, as well as from the Trade Union Congress amounting to Rs. 3000 only."\[^{163}\]

Though the workers could not gain anything yet the courageous struggle of 6 months duration was an unparallel event in the whole history. The important leaders other than labour leaders were Radharaman Misra, Bankim Mukherjee, Philip Spratt, a British Communist and Gopain Chakarvarty.

The peace of the Bengal jute industry which was like a gold mine for the mill owners and where the blood of the labourers was being sucked, was disturbed by the first labour strike in July, 1929. The low paid workers

\[^{163}\] Amrita Bazar Patrika, December 31, 1928.
(2 pice a day) living in slums and working for long hours were subjected to severe exploitation along with barbarous torturing. The workers never accepted this misfortune. On several occasions they retaliated against this criminal attitude of the authorities. But the scattered oppositions in different mills had remained unsuccessful and never before had taken the form of a united general strike. But its necessity had now become compulsory for the survival of the labour. The leaders of the workers had already come to this conclusion from their previous experience that the jute workers of Bengal could achieve something through the technique of a general strike.

The jute mills strike which occurred in 1929 deserved to be noticed for several reasons. One main reason was its size. There was no precedent of the kind in the history of strikes in Bengal. It was a general strike. Upto that time, strikes occurred in individual mills and remained confined to the mill in which it took place. Amrita Bazar Patrika of August 14, 1929 came out with the report "2 Lakhs Forty Thousand Men Idle: Thirty Eight Mills closed." This was a strike of memorable dimensions.

A significant character of the strike was the common action by Indian Jute Mills Association on the subject of wages and conditions of work. The mill owners had united to protect their class interest. Another feature of the strike was the intervention of Government which brought about the first negotiated agreement in the industry. So far the jute mills used to handle the affairs of their own without Government intervention. The circumstances not only made the Government intervention compulsory but also compelled the mill-owners to recognize the power of organised labour.

165. Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 14, 1929.
The Local Government fortnightly report mentioned that the reason for the strikes in the mills had been the extension of the working hours from 54 to 60 and a misunderstanding regarding increase in wages due to increase in working hours. This misunderstanding could not be settled as the Communists interfered on the instigation of speculators who wanted stoppage of work in mills in order to raise prices and prevent deliveries.\textsuperscript{167}

The cause stated by the Local Government was in fact the immediate cause for the strike but there were several other reasons behind the discontent among the workers. The oppression by the management, insecurity of services, the existence of Sirdari system, insufficient wages and unhygienic living conditions were some of the known causes of the general strike. The outburst of their discontent was evident through strikes in individual mills. The young labour leaders of Bengal inspired by the influence of Socialism, played a positive role in turning the individual strikes into a general strike.\textsuperscript{168}

J.C. Gupta, a prominent person of Bengal said, "The main reason of the restlessness among the workers was due to insecurity of services."\textsuperscript{169}

From July 1 to September 30, 1929, the total number of employees affected were about 2,72,000, the total number of working days lost about 28,96,000 and the total number of looms down was about 42,700 out of a total of 51,000 in Bengal.\textsuperscript{170}

A campaign for a general strike had been going on for several months. In fact the first three weeks of July constituted the preparatory phase of general strike.

\textsuperscript{167} Local Government fortnightly Report, Bengal, for Second half of July, 1929.
\textsuperscript{168} Saha, P., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{169} Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 10, 1929.
\textsuperscript{170} Karnik, V.B., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 235.
In the first week of July, 1929 the workers of the Jagathdal group of mills including Alliance, Waverly, Craig and Meghna mills refused to do extra work and decided to work only 54 hours. As soon as the 54 hours were completed they left the mills.¹⁷¹

Local Government stated in its report, "More serious are the strikes at the East Jute Mills, S.L. Mills, Megna and Alliance Jute Mill at Baranagar .......... It is however, reported that work was resumed on the July 8, 1929 on the strikers being assured by the Executive Committee of the Kakinara Labour Union of a peaceful settlement made at a conference with the managing agents."¹⁷²

In the second week of July 1929 Bengal Jute Workers Union started an intensive campaign throughout the jute mill area through distribution of leaflets, meetings and processions. Workers warmly responded. By the last week of July 1929 no strike had broken out but the workers adopted a new policy. They went into the mills, but did not work to their full capacity. This policy resembled that of a Satyagraha, which led to an immediate deadlock in the mills and the management declared a lockout in the four mills.¹⁷³

At the beginning of August 1929, the strike had almost become general. The Statesman carried a report: "120000 Jute workers on Strike: Situation Serious."¹⁷⁴ Amrita Bazar Patrika reported, "A tour round the affected area will give an idea of what a vast organisation has been rendered lifeless and what a mass of men idle."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Gupta, Ranjit Das, op.cit., p. 471.
¹⁷² Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bengal, for the First half of July, 1929.
¹⁷³ Gupta, Ranjit Das, op.cit., p. 471
¹⁷⁴ The Statesman, August 6, 1929.
¹⁷⁵ Amrit Bazar Patrika, August 9, 1929.
The Indian Jute Mills Association firmly declined to have any settlement talks with the Bengal Jute Workers Union till August 13, 1929. The employers refused to accept the strike and problems of workers as genuine and considered that strike had political origin. They began to harass and repress the workers. Clashes between the workers and the hired gundas of management were frequent.

On earlier occasions the mill-owners had throughout opposed the intervention of Government in industrial disputes but the united move of workers compelled them to approach the Government.

While the strike was going on, an offer was made by the Indian Jute Mills Association as follows:—The mills would pay the correct proportionate increase in wages for the extra hours worked: in the case of workers, time and piece, the correct proportionate increase would be the correct proportionate increase on the total earnings for the extra hours worked, they would pay Khoraki as before, there would be no victimization and the association would recommend that favourable consideration should be given by members of the association to the provision of facilities for cases of maternity.

"Higher wages, more leisure, better housing, maternity benefit and abolition of corruption were among the other demands."

Behind the posture of impartiality the coercive power of the state was fully put into the service in the interest of the capitalist employers. Amrita Bazar Patrika stated that the repressive machinery of the Government fell on

176 Home Department (Political), 257/1/1930, K.W. Encloser No. 1.
177 Saha, P., op. cit., p. 128.
179 The Statesman, August 8, 1929.
the striking workers and their leaders. Only on August 8, 1929, 230 workers and their leaders including Abdur Razak Khan were arrested.180

No direct negotiations took place between representatives and the management for a long time. An adjournment motion was moved by Dr. B.C. Roy, the leader of the Swarajya Party in Bengal Legislative Council which was carried. The Government was requested to intervene and settle the dispute. The debate in the council had some effect on the government which by now had become afraid of outbreak of communal riots and decided to intervene.181

The Labour Intelligence Officer, Bengal Government held discussions with the union leaders and the Indian Jute Mills Association and brought about a settlement. The agreement contained the following terms in addition to those offered by the Mill-owners' Association:

1. That the scales of bonuses would remain the same as they were before the July 1, 1929 when the mills were working 54 hours a week.

2. That favourable consideration be given to an adjustment of wages to time workers on the basis of the concessions suggested for piece workers.

3. That the authorities of each mill would consider favourably reasonable settlements of grievances put forward by their workers.182

After the signing of the agreement, the work was resumed on August 20, 1929 in all mills which were affected by strike. But trouble started in the mills which had not taken part in the strike.183 New strikes followed the agreement. The workers who had not participated in the strike suspected

180. Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 9, 1929.
181 Karnik, V.B., op. cit., p. 214; Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 10, 1929.
that they would not get the announced concessions unless they too went on strike. Some of them thought that there was scope of getting some more concessions.\textsuperscript{184} Local Government reported, "Unrest was still prevalent in several of the jute mills during the early part of the month, but the latest report is, till on Monday, the September 16, 1929 only two mills were not working."\textsuperscript{185}

The fresh strikes did not last long and collapsed soon by the end of the second week of September. In the next report local Government said "The Jute mills are now all working, although in a few mills the labour is still restless."\textsuperscript{186}

The strike ended successfully for the workers. They secured practically all the demands that they had put forward.\textsuperscript{187}

The Congress leaders supported the struggle in a general way. The involvement of the Bengal Congress leadership including two topmost leaders Subhash Chander Bose and J.M.Sen Gupta was peripheral and none of them visited the mill area during the period. It was curious that there was hardly any significant attempt on the part of Subhash Chander Bose to link up the strike of the Budge-Budge oil depot workers in which he himself was directly involved and the jute strikes.\textsuperscript{188} Only Jawahar Lal Nehru visited Calcutta and addressed a meeting of strikers at Zitagarh. He exhorted the workers to remain firm and to follow the instructions of the union.\textsuperscript{189} Thus the behaviour of Congress leadership was quite strange and unusual in spite

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\textsuperscript{184} Gupta, Ranjit Das, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 475.  \\
\textsuperscript{185} Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bengal, for the First half of September, 1929.  \\
\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Ibid.}, for the Second half of September, 1929.  \\
\textsuperscript{187} Karnik, V.B., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 246.  \\
\textsuperscript{188} Gupta, Ranjit Das, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 477.  \\
\textsuperscript{189} Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 16, 1929.
\end{flushright}
of the fact that the struggle of the workers was against British Capitalist employers. The work began on August 19, 1929 after the above settlement of August 18, 1929. The Communists were of the opinion that there could have been some more achievements if the action had not been hasty. This general strike provided strength to the labour class. The struggle that was fought unitedly and courageously by workers of different languages and areas was very important indeed.

A general strike of textile workers occurred in 1928 at Sholapur. At that time there was a general strike in Bombay also. It started in one mill named Sholapur Spinning and Weaving Mills workers of which had been complaining for over two months about low earnings. About 3000 workers of this mill struck work on April 21, 1928 when their grievances were not redressed. The Textile Labour Union of Bombay had a branch at Sholapur but the management of the mill refused to negotiate with it. An Advisory Board was formed by the striking workers.¹⁹⁰

The Sholapur Mill Authorities issued a history of the dispute and the circumstances that compelled them to declare a lockout. A complete deadlock prevailed there.¹⁹¹

The Times of India reported that after the strike some negotiations were carried on between the management of the Sholapur Mill and the strikers as a result of which the men resumed work but again went out as their leaders thought that that was the most suitable opportunity to form a union. As regards the five total mills at Sholapur the report said that Sholapur

¹⁹⁰ Karnik, V.B., op cit., p. 200.
¹⁹¹ The Times of India, June 11 and 12, 1928, p. 9, col. 1, 2.
Mills and Yarn Mills were working, the Vishnuv Mills was working partially and the Laxmi and Narsingh girji Mills had ceased to work altogether. 192

A peaceful picketing was held on September 2, 1928. The attendance at the two mills (Vishnuv and Narsingh Girji Mills) was higher than on the previous day, it being 70 to 75% of the usual number. The strike leaders were holding meetings of strikers everyday advising them to continue picketing. 193

Nothing unusual happened on September 6, 1928 in connection with the strike but the attendance at Vishnuv and Narsingh Girji Mills was about 5% less than the previous day. Inflammatory speeches were still being made at the meetings of strikers. 194

On September 12, 1928 there was a slight improvement in the attendance both at the Vishnuv and Narsingh Girji Mills. Some persons were arrested for an assault on a weaver of the Jain Mill. Picketing had ceased entirely and there was no more talk of Satyagraha as the office bearers of the union were losing heart. 195

On September 24, 1928, it was reported that there was gradual return to normal in Sholapur Mills. 196

The dispute in the Sholapur Spinning and Weaving Mills had ended on July 2, 1928 but the dispute in other mills continued upto October 6, 1928. 197

Throughout the general strike, the workers had no proper organisation. The position of the strike was also different in each mill from time to time. The strike ended in failure. 198

192. The Times of India, September 1, 1928, p. 12, col. 1-2.
193. Ibid., September 5, 1928, p.10, col. 5.
194. Ibid., September 8, 1928, p. 14, col. 7.
195. Ibid., September 14, 1928, p. 9, col. 1, 2.
196. Ibid., September 24, 1928, p. 6, col. 1, 2, 3.
198. Ibid., p. 201.
A general strike in Sholapur Textile Mills occurred in July, 1931 affecting all the five mills there. Prior to strike, the workers had submitted their demands and grievances to the millowners. The situation remained quiet except for the first couple of days of rowdyism by the strikers. There was disturbance again when recruitment of new workers was resorted to by the mill-owners from the so called Criminal Tribes Settlement. There were picketing, meetings and processions which were prohibited under law by the District Magistrate. No settlement could be reached even by the efforts of a conciliation committee of prominent persons formed on July 9, 1931 by the citizens. The strike was called off without achievement of any relief.\(^{199}\)

Gandhi's Salt March Programme had finally begun on April 6, 1930. The Indian people, who were asked to wait in the spectators' gallery, refused to oblige. Their wrath broke loose throughout the country. A confounded Gandhi was then arrested by a shaky government. The militant mass action so unnerved the imperialist government that they resorted to cruel repressive measures on the masses throughout the country. In Sholapur, a working class citadel, as a sequel to these events, far outstripped the imagination of Gandhi and the Congress as well as that of the imperialist government. The Times of India reported:—

"Grave rioting broke out on Thursday at Sholapur when a violent mob attacked the police and proceeded to commit all sorts of atrocities, burning police chowkis and the session court. Policemen were murdered and burnt on public street."\(^{200}\)

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The Times of India further reported, "There is practically no civil administration in the city. Sholapur has been given over in charge of the military, Martial Law was declared." In the same breath the paper commented: "'British Raj is ended', 'Gandhi Raj is here', is the conviction sought to be created in the minds of peasants, mill hands and small dealers in the bazar in Sholapur.

In the same breath the paper commented: "The newspaper narrated at length how the working class of Sholapur joining with the small shopkeepers, other middle class men and the peasants, kept the city under their control through violent means. After a heroic week-long battle the resistance in Sholapur collapsed in the face of heavy military reinforcements. How many sons of the working class attained martyrdom in the battle of Sholapur is not yet known. These countless sons, it seems, were destined to be unknown as neither the official records nor the bourgeois historiography ever bothered with their particulars.

Encouraged by the successful struggle of Kharagpur that took place in 1927, the labourers of Lilloah workshop near Calcutta submitted a memorandum of demands for increase in wages, ample holidays and some other facilities. There were two unions on the East Indian Railway since 1921. Both of them were hardly effective. After the strike on Bengal-Nagpur Railway late in 1927, attempts to organise the workers of East India Railway were made.

The Communist trade unionists wanted to carry the agitation started at Kharagpur to other railway centres. Gopendra Chakravarty, Sibnath Banerji, Dharani Goswami began their activities among railway workers at Lilloah.

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201. The Times of India, May 14 and 15, 1930
Kiran Chandra Mitra reached Lilloah from Bihar. The workers were activated by these leaders to put forth their demands before the railway authorities for redressal of grievances.\footnote{Saha, P., \textit{op.\,cit.}, p. 93.}

There were about 14,000 labourers in Lilloah workshop of different castes and religions with majority of Hindi Speaking ones. In 1920s the conditions of work and living of railwaymen throughout India were horrible. There was racial discrimination between Europeans and Indians. In late 1920s, there was a large scale retrenchment. Another grievance of the Lilloah workers was that their wages were lower than the workers of Lucknow and Jamalpur which were under the railway.\footnote{Gupta, Ranjit Das, \textit{op.\,cit.}, p. 457.}

In January, 1928, wage increase, leave facilities etc. were demanded by some workers. While the campaign for demands was on, two active union workers were dismissed by the railway on February 16, 1928 on the pretext of disorderly behaviour.\footnote{Karnik, V.B., \textit{op.\,cit.}, p. 206.} This increased the prevailing tension and the workers held a meeting on February 29, 1928 in which following demands were formulated:—

(i) Reinstatement of two dismissed workers
(ii) Doubling of the wage of unskilled workers and the fixation of their minimum wage at Rs. 30/- per month and (iii) a 25\% increase in the wages of all skilled workers to equalize them with Lahore and Lucknow State Railway workshops.\footnote{Gupta, Ranjit Das, \textit{op.\,cit.}, p. 458.}

The background of the strike, as published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika newspaper, was given by B.P. Jain, a lawyer of Howrah. He stated that about a fortnight ago, one worker was discharged and another was served with one
month's notice and on March 3, 1928 four more workers were dismissed. The workers had made an appeal to reinstate these workers.²⁰⁸

The workers entered the workshop in normal way but did no work. They demanded reinstatement of six dismissed workers. Four were reinstated on March 6, 1928 but workers were not satisfied and continued their Satyagraha on the next day also. On March 8, 1928 a lock-out was declared by the railway. Thus began the protracted agitation of the East India Railway workers.²⁰⁹

The leaders of the struggle were of diverse political thinking. The struggle was mainly guided by K.C. Mitra who was nationalist minded. Sibnath Banerjee, a leftist and socialist was a major leader. He had differences with Communists and assisted K.C. Mitra throughout²¹⁰. Some Communists belonging to Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party actively participated in the struggle and wanted to transform the struggle into a general strike on whole railway but K.C. Mitra, who was known among workers as Jatadhari Baba and had great influence over them, was desirous of calling off the strike early. The uncompromising attitude of the railway compelled K.C. Mitra to continue the agitation and extend it to Howrah area, Asansol, Jamalpur and other places.²¹¹

A meeting was held on March 12, 1928 in which the workers declared that they would not resume work unless their demands were accepted. Thus the lockout turned into a strike. In another meeting on March 14, 1928 the

workers, in one voice, showed their desire to extend the strike to the whole line but the secretary did not agree.\textsuperscript{212}

A large number of workers went in procession on March 28, 1928 to Calcutta and demonstrated in front of East-India Railway Agent’s office in Fairlie place. In the same afternoon, police opened fire on workers picketing at Locoshed, killing two and injuring several.\textsuperscript{213}

An eye-witness account published in Amrita Bazar Patrika stated that firing was resorted to without prior warning. Mould shot at a man taking the rifle of a Gorkha. Shaw and Major Hewett also started shooting, injuring seven or eight men. Two men died.\textsuperscript{214}

So far i.e. upto March 28, 1928 workers of the neighbouring engineering factories, shops of Burn and company, Martin and Company Bird and Company and Willington Jute Mills had been observing the Lilloah workers' struggle with sympathy. But after the police firing, they also resorted to strike in protest against the shooting.\textsuperscript{215}

In April, 1928 there were several hectic activities. The Bengal Provincial Congress condemned the brutal firing on the unarmed and peaceful strikers at Bamungachi. Six committees were formed to help and manage the strike. Rally of workers marched through the industrial area twice which created interest among industrial workers as well as general public.\textsuperscript{216}

Kiran Mitra tried hard for a peaceful settlement. He met the Governor on May 29, 1928 and offered some concession in the demands to reach a settlement but the Governor showed his inability to intervene in the matter

\textsuperscript{212} Gupta, Ranjit Das, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 459.
\textsuperscript{213} Saha, P., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{214} Amrita Bazar Patrika, April 4, 1929.
\textsuperscript{215} Gupta, Ranjit, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 460.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., p. 460.
which concerned the Government of India. K.C. Mitra also requested the Congress to participate more actively. Congress displayed more interest. Public meetings were held and addressed by eminent people. The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee president appealed to the people for raising funds for the strike. Contributions were received from the Red International Labour Union, International Transport Workers' Federation, British Trade Union Congress and International Federation of Trade Unions.

The Times of India carried the news that K.C. Mitra, after his return from Asansol, informed the strikers on June 9, 1928 that a sum of Rs. 15000/- had been received for their relief from foreign countries.

The leaders of Workers' and Peasants' Party who had withdrawn themselves from the strike again joined it and suggested an alternate line of action. In a meeting on May 16, 1928 Spratt said that pressure was required to be built up on the railway by extending the strike on to other departments otherwise there was no use of this strike. Workers started displaying red flags and raised slogans like 'Majdur Raj Ki Jai' and 'Lal Paltan Ki Jai'. These leaders went to Dndal and Asansol sometimes along with K.C. Mitra, with the purpose of encouraging workers there to go on strike. They got a positive response from Dndal and Asansol workers as they struck work on their appeal.

K.C. Mitra asked the workers to stage Satyagraha at Law courts, railway stations and agent's office in order to keep their interest and determination in high spirits. The strikers offered Satyagraha in hundreds. As a result

running of Amta Howrah Light Railway and vehicular traffic in the city came to a halt. This plan was successful but had to be abandoned on issue of a notice by the magistrate on May 11, 1928 against K.C. Mitra prohibiting all processions and demonstrations.  

In order to create a division among workers of Lilloah, the Railway Agent opened the Lilloah workshop on May 25, 1928. Though the workshop remained open for several days but it was not attended. By the end of May, 1928 all workers of Ondal had struck work. In early June, 1928 workers of Loco shed of Asansol also struck out when a Muslim worker at prayers was kicked by a security man.  

On June 5, 1928: a call for a general strike was issued by K.C. Mitra. Asansol was an important centre on the railway where the railway wanted the work to go on. So police and military was called in and blacklegs were recruited from other railways. Workers were not able to face the combined efforts of the railway and government. 

About 30,000 workers were on strike in early June, 1928 in which 14000 were from Lilloah workshop, a large number from Ondal and Asansol and about 12,000 from the engineering factories and jute mills. 

The government directly helped the management to suppress the strike and its attitude became strict and severe day by day. The government and the railway allowed the dispute to continue and waited for the surrender of strikers under exhaustion. The workers and their leaders made several attempts for a settlement and for referring the dispute to a board of conciliation but

222 Karnik, V.B., op.cit., pp. 208-209.  
225 Gupta, Ranjit Das, op.cit., p. 463.  
226 Saha, P., op.cit., p. 100.
the authorities wanted an unconditional submission. At this stage there were signs of weariness among workers and by the end of June 1928, several hundred Lilloah workers attended the shops but still 75% of them resorted to Satyagraha who had to be turned out forcibly.

Finally, a decision was taken at a meeting of 2000 railwaymen at Howrah on July 9, 1928 to withdraw the strike unconditionally. K.C. Mitra admitted that union's resources had exhausted and therefore he was not in a position to ask the workers to continue the strike. Thus the strike came to an end unconditionally.

While the imperialist government suppressed this courageous struggle mercilessly, the imperialist press condemned it. The imperialist press started the shameful campaign that the strike had the Russian support but the national press supported it. The Amrita Bazar Patrika condemned the non-participation of the Congress.

The Indian Labour Class got the first valuable training in politics. The workers, who were struggling for economic demands, were crushed by the imperialist power with cruel and naked oppressive measures. It was felt that for the awakening of workers, anti-imperialist activities must be combined with the struggles for economic demands. These two struggles depended on each other for success. The chief benefit of the strike was political one.

M. Singaravelu Chettiar, a Communist, had been active in Madras since 1922. The strike on South Indian Railway in 1928 was led by him. It

230. Sen, Sukomal, op.cit., p. 254
was a major strike. The cause of dispute was the reorganisation of workshops leading to substantial retrenchment of workers. The workers did not agree to the methods of selection proposed by the management. So there was a deadlock and the workshops at Golden Rock, Nagapatam Podanur and Trichinopoly were locked-out by the railway authorities.\textsuperscript{232}

The Times of India reported that following a lock out consequent upon Satyagraha, the Trichinopoly South Indian Railway Engineering Workshops' men went in a huge procession yesterday (July 1, 1928) through the streets and a mass meeting was held later at which Mukundalah Sircar declared that unless the agent withdrew the retrenchment order, there would a general strike.\textsuperscript{233}

Again the Times of India carried the news of 'Strike Threat on South Indian Railways'. The president of the Central Committee of the South Indian Railway Labour Union was reported to have stated that unless the men's demands were granted, there would be a general strike from July 20, 1928. The agent was reported to have issued a letter to the workers in which he denied the wages to be low and had added that workers would not be paid anything in case of strike.\textsuperscript{234}

The retrenchment was recommended by the Raven Committee on September 9, 1927. The proposal of retrenchment was announced and the workers had begun to think of a general strike. The railway took several months to finalise the plans. In April, 1928, an announcement to retrench 3171 men was made. Offer of payment of gratuity was declared for

\textsuperscript{232} Krishna, C.S., Labour Movement in Tamil Nadu, 1918-1933, New Delhi, 1989, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{233} The Times of India, July 4, 1928, p. 12, col. 1, 2.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., July 16, 1928.
voluntary resignation. There was little response even when the amount of gratuity was raised. Then the railway wanted to introduce trade test to get rid of incompetent and inexperienced workers. This was strongly resisted by the workers.

During this time, the workers organised themselves into a union. This union had two wings, a moderate wing consisting of Ernest Kirk and B. Shiva Rao and an extremist wing having Singaravelu Chettiar and Mukandilal Sarkar. Both wings tried for intervention of Government but failed. A decision was taken to begin the strike from the midnight of July 19, 1928. The agent in a bid to avoid the strike, offered to refer the grievances of running staff and menials to Labour Commissioner of Madras for arbitration but workers did not agree.

As the strike began, the workers dominated the strike committee and took control of the strike. Boulders were placed across the lines to stop the movements of trains, couplings between carriages disconnected and all sorts of methods were used to hold up railway traffic. Police opened fire on strikers at several places, and killed and injured many persons. The railway authorities tried to run trains under police escort. One such train was stopped at Mayavaram when workers staged satyagraha on the rails. The police opened fire and charged the Satyagrahis with bayonets. Meetings and demonstrations were banned by government. The leaders of the workers and a number of strikers were arrested as a result of which the strike began to collapse and some sections started working on resumption of workers. The strike committee met on July 29, 1928 and decided to call off the strike from July 30, 1928. The failure of strike was due to violence. Some of the leaders

who were communists were responsible for violent actions which defeated the strike.236

A report in the Times of India stated that after striking for thirteen days the majority of the South Indian Railway workers returned to work unconditionally on Thursday, (August 2, 1928). The agent had withdrawn recognition of the Labour Union on account of adopting direct action.237

This ten-days strike which began on July 20, 1928 is considered to be important as it was the first experiment in the field of struggles by a combination of several unions. The revengeful attitude of the government was clearly visible. The railway workers, fed up with the bitter experience of small scale struggles, took an oath to form a united front of all the railway-men of the country. The problem of retrenchment was being faced by all equally. With the efforts of the Communists, a strong union was formed in the GIP Railway. The GIP Railwaymen decided to call a one-day protest strike on February 4, 1930 but on February 3, 1930 the President of the union, R.S. Ruikar decided to continue the strike indefinitely. The strike was fairly general all over the GIP Railway.238

The Times of India reported that the strike on the GIP Railway was put into execution on Tuesday at 7 A.M. and cabinmen, hamals and other menial staff went out at the appointed hour and that the executive of the Railwaymen's union was making every effort to spread and keep alive the strike fever so that it might be continued indefinitely.239

The cause of the strike was the non-redressal of the following grievances and demands:

237. The Times of India, August 3, 1928, p. 10, col. 1, 2.
239. The Times of India, February 5, 1930, p. 7, col. 6, 7.
No victimization of union workers, no wrongful dismissal or discharge of any railway employee, control over fines and debits, formation of Joint Divisional Advisory Committee of the Union and Railway Officials, increase in wages, hours of work, improvement of leave privileges, holiday, conversion of daily rates to monthly rates, free Railway Passes, uniforms, abolition of racial discrimination, abolition of periodical medical examination, service agreement, consideration of individual complaints, management of GIP Railway Mutual Benefit Society, promotion of workshop employees, providing employment for workshop apprentices after completion of their training and provision of residential passes, sufficient watermen and Langer flag men and sufficient quarters for gangmen.240

Added to these longstanding grievances was the threat of retrenchment which had been hanging over them since 1927.241

The Fortnightly Report of the local government stated that unrest had been shown in the GIP Railway strike and Madras Labour seemed averse from anything in the nature of sympathetic action.242

As a result of strike decision, 8,664 employees of the Parel and Mataunga workshops and a number of line staff, mostly menials went on strike at 7 AM on February 4, 1930. It was followed by picketing and strikers were encouraged to hold out till their demands were accepted. The Staff Union of GIP Railway, the Labour Committee, the Bombay Youth League and B.B. and C.I. Railway Employees' Union Bombay sympathised with strikers by passing resolutions to this effect. The B.B. and C.I. Railway

242. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, for First half of February, 1930.
Employees' Union donated Rs. 1,000 to the strike fund and asked all its members to contribute 5 days' wages to help the strike movement. A public appeal was made by the Provincial Congress Committee for monetary help.243

The railway retaliated by recruiting new hands and the strikers were forcibly ejected out of the railway quarters with the help of police and military. Some leading workers were also arrested.244

The issue was raised in the Legislative Assembly by Aney and Dewan Chamanlal through short notice questions and several supplementary questions. Sir George Rainy the member for Commerce and Railway outlined the position of the strike. He declared in the assembly that the government had no intention of extending the time for resumption of duty by strikers beyond March 17, 1930. An undertaking was given in government's communique of March 1, 1930 that an employee who went on strike and who offered to return to duty by the prescribed date and who could not be taken on duty by the prescribed date and who could not be taken on duty because his post had been permanently filled, would be put on the waiting list and reinstated at the earliest possible moment.245

The All India Railwaymen's Federation took the initiative and met the Railway Board. It was able to secure concession on the following demands:- 1. Non-victimization of strikers (2) Early announcement regarding leave rules and revision of wages of low paid staff, and (3) Reinstatement of D.B. Kulkarni if he were medically fit. On the basis of this agreement which was decided to come into force from

244. Karnik, V.B., op.cit., p. 218.
245. The Times of India, March 27, 1930, p. 12, col. 6, 7
March 1, 1930, S.C. Joshi, V.V. Giri and Diwan Chamanlal appealed to the workers to call off the strike on March 15, 1930.\footnote{246}

The Communists opposed the agreement and on their opposition the workers rejected the settlement. Under the circumstances R.S. Ruikar, the president of the union, at first, denounced the agreement but finding that the strike was ebbing out, again gave the call of calling off the strike. The strike came to an end on March 15, 1930.\footnote{247}

The Communists did not accept the position and wanted the strike to continue. The position drifted in their favour when railway did not take on duty those strikers who had taken a prominent part in the strike and then announced retrenchment of 1500 to 2000 workers in Parel and Matunga Workshops and a similar number in Jhansi and other shops. The workers were enraged. Taking benefit of the situation, the Communists persuaded the strike committee to launch Satyagraha and picketing. The infuriated workers took a big procession through the city of Bombay and held a meeting opposite to Agent's office. After the meeting the strikers went to Victoria Terminus to board a train to their homes. The railway authorities summoned the police who lathi charged and opened fire on the workers killing two and injuring 50. All the prominent leaders were arrested. Ultimately, the Executive Committee of the union called off the strike officially in its meeting on April 15, 1930.\footnote{248}

Out of 22,608 workers involved in the strike 13000 were from workshops of Parel, Matunga Manmad and Jhansi. Drivers, guards and

\footnote{246}{Karnik, V.B.,\textit{op.cit.}, p. 219.}
\footnote{247}{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 219-220.}
\footnote{248}{\textit{Ibid.}}
firemen did not take part in the strike making it possible to keep the trains running. The number of mandays lost was about 9 lakhs.\(^{249}\)

In fact, this was an energetic, aggressive and well organised strike. The basis of these achievements was the proper working of the union and strike committee.

Under the workshop reorganisation scheme, retrenchment of Railway staff was carried on from 1927 to 1934. On Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway, retrenchment became the burning issue in early 1930s.\(^{250}\)

The Government of India pressurized by public opinion, set up a Court of Enquiry under the Trade Dispute Act in 1931. Even the Court of Enquiry was unable to stop the retrenchment. As a result, workshop workers of Perambur in Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway went on strike on October 24, 1932. After a few days, workers of Engineering Workshops at Arkonam and Mechanical Workshop at Hubli also struck work. In all, 7,000 workers went on strike. There was a proposal for retrenchment of about 700 workers and for introducing short time as well.\(^{251}\) The railways introduced short time from October 21, 1932. The Agent ignored the demands of workers and was uncompromising. The union on the other hand consulted their workers and a decision was taken to go on strike.\(^{252}\) Preparation for a strike had been going on since August, 1932. The President and the General Secretary had issued a letter to the affiliated unions saying that the Council of Action had decided to give notice of a general strike on September 1, 1932. They were advised to organise and appoint local strike committees. Thus strike movement was carefully planned.\(^{253}\) Agitation continued among

\(^{249}\) Karnik, V.B., *op.cit.*, p. 221.
\(^{251}\) Karnik, V.B., *op.cit.*, p. 268.
\(^{253}\) *The Hindu*, August 6, 1932.
the employees of the Perambur Railway Workshops. The men now demanded that they should be consulted before any alleged surplus staff was reduced and that the management should first prove that the staff really was surplus.254

The Madras and Southern Maratha Railway Employees Union, Perambur obtained the opinion of their workers in a meeting held on October 21, 1932. The workers voted in favour of strike. V.V. Giri, the President of the union and G. Krishnamurthi, the General Secretary along with other leaders went door to door advising the workers to remain at home from October 24, 1932.255 The strike started on October 24, 1932 in Perambur Mechanical Workshop where the attendance was only 300 out of a total strength of 5,700. The clerical staff of the workshops struck work from October 26, 1932 and employees of Arkonam Engineering Workshops joined in from November 3, 1932.256 A fortnightly report of the local government stated that the trouble in Perambar Railway workshops had resulted into a strike from October 24, 1932 with about 5000 men on strike.257 The workers confined themselves to their villages and were being informed about the latest position daily through evening bulletins.258 The threatening attitude adopted by the railway administration was revealed through notices pasted in the Perambur, Hubli and Arkonam workshops saying that any man absent from work without leave in the afternoon of November 22, 1932 or thereafter until further notice would be assumed to have left the company's service and would be refused admittance to the workshops.259

254. Local Government Fortnightly Report, Madras, for the First half of October, 1932.
256. Ibid., p. 139.
258. The Hindu, October 25, 1932.
Several important members were warned that they could be victimized for their conduct.  

The Hindu reported that a notice was issued on October 26, 1932 by the Acting Chief Auditor of the Madras and Southern Maratha Railway that any servant, who had executed an agreement, went on strike without giving the Company a month's notice would automatically break the agreement forfeiting his claim for provident fund, bonus, gratuity, leave etc.

The union leaders were prohibited from addressing meetings under section 144 Cr.PC Assurance was given to the loyal workers that any reduction of staff needed would be from the strikers.

Negotiations were held between the administration and the union through the citizens' committee and the strike was proposed to be called off on December 23, 1932. after arriving at a settlement in which the union gave way on almost all points. Before the workers could join, a fresh crisis emerged when the administration refused to take 63 workers on duty against whom they had already recruited men during the strike. The union leaders then advised the workers to hold out.

The attempt of the citizens' Committee finally succeeded on January 7, 1933 when a settlement was reached between the Agent of Railway and the Union and strike was called off the same day. The Union accepted retrenchment of 370 workers. The great struggles in railways as mentioned above provided a stimulus of growth to the trade union movement.

260 The Hindu, November 2, 1932.
261 Ibid., October 27, 1932.
262 Krishna, C.S., op.cit., pp.142-143.
263 Local Government Fortnightly Report, Madras, for Second half of December, 1932.
In November 1934, strike took place in the Calcutta Port and docks. It started on November 26, 1934 and ended on December 16, 1934. The port and dock workers were being mercilessly exploited by the authorities. The workers in their demand stated how they were being exploited and made to work for more hours than they were paid for. They demanded increase in wages, regulation of hours of work and some other facilities. The demand for increase in wages was from Rs. 12 Annas 8 to Rs. 16 Annas 8 for daytime work and from Rs. 16 Aunhas 8 to Rs. 20 Annas 8 for night work. They demanded the hours of work to be from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. with one hour break. They also demanded two gangs per crane instead of existing system of one gang per crane. The authorities turned down the demands of workers who struck work from November 26, 1934. The Bengal Trade Union Federation, the Bengal Youth League and other mass organisations supported the strike. P. Banerjee moved an adjournment motion at the Bengal Legislative Council which was rejected. The Government refused to intervene.

The strike ended in a defeat as the Sardars who supported the strike in the beginning, defected. Government's repression was another cause of failure of the strike. A number of workers and union leaders were arrested and imprisoned. The union was declared illegal. On December 16, 1934 the strike was called off and workers resumed duty the next day. Though the workers did not get their demands, the strike had a sobering effect on

266. Karnik, V.B., op. cit., p. 266.
268. Ibid., December 12 and 13, 1934.
269. Karnik, V.B., op. cit., p. 266.
employers and Sardars and working conditions were improved after some time. 271

The Congress held its session at Calcutta in December, 1928 under the presidency of Motilal Nehru. While the Congress session was going on, the Calcutta Port Trust Union, East India Railway Labour Union, Bengal Jute Workers' Association and Calcutta Tramwaymen's Union organised their workers and assembled at Calcutta maidan. Then they proceeded towards the Congress avenue at Park circus in a two mile long procession. They carried banners with the inscriptions "Glory to the Red Army," "Long live the Independent Socialist Republic of India" throughout their march to the pandal. They kept on shouting "Lal Paltan Ki Jai" (Victory of the Red Army), "Lajpat Rai Ki Jai" and "Labour Ki Jai." 272

They held a meeting in front of Congress pandal which was addressed by Jawaharlal Nehru and some other leaders but the workers were not satisfied and insisted on holding the meeting inside the pandal. 273

The Congress volunteers resisted the entry of the workers inside but the 30,000 strong crowd of the demonstrators ignoring the resistance of the Congress volunteers entered the pandal and held a meeting there. Jawaharlal Nehru had to preside over the meeting. 274 The Statesman reported that thirty thousand workers from various mills and factories of Bengal almost forcibly entered the Congress pandal to assert their rights under the aegis of the Congress. They demanded the Congress (1) assistance for the distressed Bauria workers (2) a grant of Rs. 25000 for labour organisations in each

271. Karnik, V.B., op. cit., p. 266.
272. The Times of India, January 1, 1929, p. 13, col. 5.
274. Sen, Sukomal, op. cit., p. 289; Amrita Bazar Patrika, December 31, 1928.
province (3) committees in every province for mass organisations (4) equal seats for labour leaders in Congress Working Committee.275

The following resolution was passed in the meeting: "The mass meeting of the workers and peasants of the land shall not rest content till complete independence is established and all exploitation from capitalism and imperialism cease. We do call upon the Congress to keep that goal before them and organise the national forces for that purpose."276

When the large crowd came out of the pandal and gathered under the Congress flag, it was addressed by Gandhi.277

The progress achieved by the Calcutta working class in its organisation and consciousness could be clearly seen in the huge workers' march. They spelled out their grievances, aspirations and militant behaviour. The resolution demanding complete independence clearly indicated their attempt to deepen the ties between the labour upsurge and nationalist politics.278

The attempt of the Congress volunteers to prevent the entry of workers into pandal was a reflection of ambivalence and tension between the nationalist politics and the leftist trends. However a flexible approach could be allowed in the behaviour of Motilal Nehru who allowed the workers to hold a meeting inside pandal and Jawahar Lal Nehru and Gandhi who addressed the workers meeting.279

All these were very significant events in the history of India. Even the official history of Congress could not minimise its importance. It testified

275. The Statesman, January 1, 1929; The Times of India, January 1, 1929 p. 13, col. 16.
277. The Times of India, January 1, 1929, p. 13, col. 6.
279. Ibid.
to the working class advance towards the forefront of the National Liberation Movement of India.

The intelligence report stated, "The growing antagonism between the Congress and the Labour Movement was well shown by the invasion of the Congress Pandal by labour demonstrations in spite of the opposition of the Congress volunteers and of the refusal of the authorities of the Congress to allow the pandal to be used for a labour demonstration. The Congress authorities proved absolutely incapable of controlling the labour leaders and their followers."280

It is specially note-worthy that in 1928 when the working class declared full freedom of India as its unambiguous political aim, the Congress could not yet go so far as to declare that goal and for that they had to wait for one year more.281

In fact the advances made by the Calcutta working class in its organisation and consciousness were reflected in the huge workers' march. It voiced the grievances, aspirations and militancy of the workers. It also reflected an attempt to deepen the links between the labour upsurge and nationalist politics. This was particularly indicated by the adoption of a resolution by the labour rally demanding complete political independence. The rally was in a sense the first organised intervention on the part of workers of greater Calcutta as a class in the national political situation with the conscious objective of influencing the course of nationalist politics and revealed the potential that the working class had as a militant anti-imperialist, nationalist mass force. At the same time the attempt of the

280  Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bengal, for First half of January, 1929.
281  Sen, Sukomal, op.cit., p. 289.
Congress volunteer corps led by Bose to prevent the entry of the rally to the Congress Pandal was a reflection of the ambivalence and, in fact, the tension between the nationalist politics and the leftist trends mentioned above. However, the fact that Motilal Nehru, the President of the Calcutta Session, allowed the workers to hold a meeting inside the Pandal and Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru who addressed the rally showed a flexibility in approach, while at the same time reflecting the complexities in the relationship between nationalist leadership and labour.

In 1927, the British Government decided to form and send a commission to India to judge the capability of the Indians for swaraj. This was called "Simon Commission". Since there was no Indian representative in the commission, the Congress took it as a national humiliation and decided to boycott it. 282

In its Madras session in December, 1927, the Congress resolved to boycott the commission and gave a call to the people to stage demonstration and protests against it. It was decided to observe a nation-wide hartal on February 3, 1928, the day on which the commission was to set foot on Indian soil. 283

The leftists in the National Movement, the Communists in 'Workers and Peasants Party' and All India Trade Union Congress took a more radical view towards the Simon Commission. The All India Trade Union Congress adopted a resolution completely boycotting the commission. The Workers' and Peasants' Party in its manifesto challenged the very right of British Imperialism to make any decision on destiny of India. The Communist Party of India condemned this deliberate show of disrespect and public insult.

on the part of British rulers and challenged its authority. The Communist Party and the Workers and Peasants' Party fully supported the Congress boycott of the commission and gave a call of strike on February 3, 1928, calling upon the workers to make massive mobilization.284

The National Movement, which had experienced a setback after the failure of Non-Cooperation Movement, revived and began to develop after the appointment of Simon Commission.285

The Indian Working Class did not lag behind in the national liberation movement which had started now and responded to the call of strike by the Congress magnificently. A hartal which had no equal was spontaneously and cheerfully observed by different classes of people on February 3, 1928, the day Simon Commission arrived in India.286

On that day a huge crowd of workers of Bombay carrying placards with inscriptions like 'Workers of the world unite'; 'Down with British Imperialism'; 'Nothing short of Independence' staged a march past to the meeting place. They burnt effigies of Simon and MacDonald.287 There were industrial workers who joined the strike and participated in all meetings and demonstrations.288

The Times of India reported that in Bombay workers of almost all the cotton mills came out in procession led by labour class leaders and were joined by the workers of GIP Matunga workshops and the BB&CI workshops. All these processions merged with the labour meeting held at Faras Road.289

284. Kumar, Kapil (ed.), op.cit., p. 87.
287. Kumar, Kapil (ed.), op.cit., p. 89.
289. The Times of India, February 6, 1928.
The Bombay Municipal Workmen's Union took a leading role in the protest against the Simon Commission. They were aware of the political importance of the occasion.290

The participation of the organised working class of Bengal in this hartal was splendid. Almost all factories and mills of Calcutta and Howrah and the suburbs, the tramway of Calcutta, workshops of Buru, Jessop and Hoogly and Dockings of Howrah were entirely closed on February 3, 1928.291

The Forward reported that the entire traffic staff of the Port Trust Railway from Budge-Budge to Cossipore had struck work. Nearly 3000 men were on strike. The jute mills in the Chitpore remained closed on February 3, 1928.292 Hockney Carriages, Carts, buses and taxis did not ply despite all efforts of police to persuade them to do so.293 The Forward reported that workers in Tata Factory at Jamshedpur showed their resentment by suspending work for two minutes at 11 AM on February 3, 1928.294

There was no political programme to unite the workers. They were united by the common anti-imperialist slogan. Large scale participation of workers in national movement was an important development which not only strengthened the national struggle but also helped in setting in motion the process of developing its own leadership.295

In fact the political strikes and demonstrations against the arrival of the Simon Commission in February placed the working class for the moment in the vanguard of the national struggle: for both the Congress leadership

291. Forward, February 3, 1928.
292. Ibid.
293. Ibid., February 4, 1928.
294. Ibid., February 5, 1928.
and the reformist trade union leadership had frowned on the project and were startled by its success.296

During this period, it may be seen that the remarkable feature of these strikes was the lack of contact between the employees and employers. On so many occasions, the owners did not pay heed to the demands of the workers resulting in protracted strikes. There is ample reason to believe that certain strikes could have been avoided if the owners had welcomed negotiations.

Main feature of the period was the influence of Communists amongst the workers. The Communists dominated the scene and their revolutionary ideas had greatly influenced the working class. The Communists provided the leadership in most of the labour strikes and struggles and participated in the trade union affairs. This filled the workers with enthusiasm and courage who were so far timid and weak. The Communists also attempted to organise the workers into a militant and revolutionary force.

On the other hand we saw that the local Congressmen had to take a more militant stance in order to neutralize the Communist hold. Congress leaders like Jawahar Lal Nehru and Subhash Chander Bose were greatly attracted towards the Socialist ideology. For example in Bombay it is evident that Bombay Provincial Congress Committee started its labour subcommittee and its textile union. The Congress Socialist minded leaders like H.N. Shastri and Raja Ram Shastri had influence over the Mazdoor Sabha at Kanpur in 1929. They were preaching class-war doctrine and wanted to wipe out Capitalism. In their opinion, the type of Swaraj that Congress desired was not the one that could fulfil the wishes of the labourers and peasants because

296. Dutt, Rajni Palm, op.cit., p.412.
if such a swaraj was attained, it would be controlled by capitalists, the natural enemies of labourers. As such the local Congressmen had to agree to the theory of militancy as advocated by the Communists.

At the time of jute workers' strike in Bengal in 1929, the Congress acted in a similar manner in support of the workers. Jawahar Lal Nehru visited Calcutta himself to take stock of the situation. An year earlier i.e. in 1928, the Congress had faced the militant behaviour of the Bengal workers when a 30000 workers' strong rally took possession of the Congress Pandal at the time of their annual session. They passed a resolution of complete independence of India and a welfare scheme for working class. The Congress was greatly upset by this awakening of class consciousness among workers.

The prominent feature of Communist attitude which emerged was that the Communists firmly believed that Capitalism and Imperialism could be weakened if there were more strikes and of longer duration. They had the planning to convert every strike into a general one. Every strike according to them, was an opening era to topple the imperialist power. They followed this doctrine in several strikes in Bombay and Bengal. The police under this excuse indulged in atrocities on striking workers.

It is also evident that during this period a large section of working class too, which had not come under the Communist influence in areas like Jamshedpur, fought their struggle with courage inspite of the national leaders suggesting compromise and retreat. The strike in Tata Iron and Steel Company was a glaring example of this kind. In Jamshedpur the Congress was having a complete hold over the workers' Union but the workers had no faith in that leadership. Even Subhash Chander Bose could not influence the workers. The Congress - led union was being described by the workers as 'Company Ka Dalal'.
It is noticeable that the struggles were violent in nature. There was a clear revolutionary attitude among the workers and the revolutionary ideas of workers and their militant behaviour greatly benefitted the National Movement. The National Movement expanded largely after 1928. It took the shape of a mass Civil Disobedience Movement in early 1930. There was no effect of it in any way on the strikes. All the strikes that took place were of economic cause. The strikers, however, learnt some techniques out of the National Movement like 'Satyagraha' which they applied as stay-in strikes and peaceful disobedience of prohibitory orders of meetings, processions and picketing. The outside political upsurge had no effect on trade union work.

The government were hostile towards labour on several occasions during their struggles. P.C. Joshi, V.V. Giri and some others were served notices during South Indian Railway strike in 1928 at Madras by a magistrate forbidding them to make speeches and ordered them to leave the district immediately. P.C. Joshi had gone there to settle the issue. The police did not allow even the peaceful picketing by strikers at Sholapur in 1928 textile workers' strike. The police resorted to firing and also arrested some volunteers. The Government in no dispute tried to bring about a settlement under the Trade Disputes Act. Only in a few cases, court of enquiry or Board of conciliation was appointed against the several appeals of the unions. The government did not hesitate to utilise police force to curb the strikes. Meetings processions and picketing was declared unlawful under police act from time to time. Strikers were detained and arrested under emergency legislation on several occasions. Actually the government regarded every strike anti-British and politically motivated due to which it behaved unsympathetically and
cruelly. Communists' participation also was responsible for this attitude of
the government to some extent. But although workers may have been
influenced by persons with nationalist, communist or commercial end to
serve, we believe that there has rarely been a strike of any importance
which has not been due, entirely or largely, to economic reasons.

In short the period under study is marked with militancy of labour.
The Communist and left power influence was visible all through. Compared
to the period i.e. 1919 to 1927, the Government appeared to be more
determined to suppress the labour power. Further, there was increase in
public response. The media support to the labour was viewed with scorn
and accused of leaving the basic problem untouched, by Government as
well as the Capitalists. As far as the labour was concerned there were clear
signs of pride, self-assertion and independence. Largely the leadership of
the labour was controlled by the intelligentsia, national leaders and social
parties. Aware of these emerging trends, Congress under the leadership of
Gandhi was equally active and employed flexibility in their political
strategy. Armed with Gandhian doctrines of non-violence, satyagraha,
trusteeship, arbitration and conciliation, the party leadership intervened in
the labour disputes. Many a time class-cooperation was secured compared
to class-conflict. But there were many in the Congress who felt that this
way was too long and too slow for the urgency of labour needs, and in the
end unproductive. In their view the political scene was hardly encouraging
as the political machinery was more entrenched in the status quo.
Consequently some of these leaders drifted to a new line and strategy
which was different to what Gandhi stood for. The speeches of Jawahar Lal
Nehru, Subhash Chander Bose and many others deviated from the Ahmedabad
experiment. However, from the hindsight it can be said that the ground realities were not ripe for revolution. These leaders, alongwith radicals were escaping from bitter realities into a world of fantasy; feeding on the empty stuff of dreams. Gandhi was aware of this lack of contact with reality. As such, he steadfastly stood with his principles and ideas. The mind and strategy of Gandhi will be discussed and analysed in the next chapter.