Chapter - V

WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT BETWEEN 1970-1980

The formation of trade unions strengthened the hands of the weavers. But their problems continued. Since most of the trade unions were politically affiliated they were interested towards the growth of their political party than the interest of the weavers. In an attempt to solve the problems of the weavers, the unions suggested to form Factory Committees and used them as their propaganda machinery.

The Factory Committee

The trade unions did not want to interfere in the small problems that arose in the factories. Hence they suggested to form Factory Committees in the industries. Hence Factory Committees were formed in all the industries.

The Factory Committee consisted of four or five workers of a particular factory.\(^1\) The members used to go to the cabin of the proprietor with reverence and presented their demands for consideration. In the informal talks the proprietor used to offer some concessions and the workers would accept those offers which were

\(^1\) Personal interview, Krishnan Nair, N., Krishnancoil, 2.2.2011.
highly disappointing to the labourers. But it was accepted without argument. The implementation of the concessions accepted by the workers depended upon the goodwill of the proprietors.

**Early attempts of Trade Unions**

The D.M.K. sponsored Kumari Mavatta Dravida Kaithari Nesavalar Sangam and the CITU affiliated Aikkiya Kaithari Nesavu Thozhilalar Sangam took the cause of the labourers in 1964. During those days the weavers were dreaming of uniform wages for weaving the same variety of cloth, in all the factories. In 1964, the Factory Committee of Monies Textiles demanded that the wages should be on par with the wages paid to the weavers of Rajan Weaving Factory at Vadassery. The political parties based trade unions supported the demand of the Factory Committee of Monies Textiles. But without any confrontation, the proprietor of Monies Textiles, due to the intervention of his General Manager N. Arunachalam accepted the demand.²

From 1964 onwards, the trade unions demanded enhanced wages. When the proprietors did not heed to the demands of the labourers, they resorted to pressure tactics such as gate meetings,  

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² Personal Interview, Arunachalam, N., Vadassery, 11.3.2011.
slogan shouting, dharna, etc. Ordinarily the proprietors allowed the labourers to prolong their agitation in order to make the labourers suffer due to poverty and withdraw from the strike or force workers to accept their decision. In certain circumstances they penalized the labourers and the labourers went to the labour court for establishing their rights, but in vain.

In 1970 there was a widespread scarcity for yarn in the market. Entrepreneurs found it difficult to purchase required yarn for their looms. Warps were not sufficiently available for the weavers. Even the available yarn was supplied in black market. So there was a standstill in production and the weavers lost their employment. Hence the trade unions planned to organize a joint agitation. They demanded yarn supply at controlled price and sufficient supply of warps for wearing. They presented a memorandum to the proprietors. Gate meetings, slogan shouting and dharna became regular. As there was no response from the proprietors, the labourers resorted to strike work and the police arrested the leaders. The trade union leaders, particularly the D.M.K. party based leaders approached the then Chief Minister of

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3 Memorandum of the Joint Action Counsil, September 1970, p. 3.
5 Handbill dated 4 September 1970.
Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi who was camping at Kuttalam. The Chief Minister issued necessary Government Orders for supplying yarn directly to the weavers through the trade unions at controlled price. As the Government Order ensured supply of yarn to the workers the D.M.K. based sangams felt relieved.\(^6\) The D.M.K. sponsored trade union, Kumari Mavatta Dravida Kaithari Nesavalar Sangam got yarn quota from the government and distributed them to their members. The Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Javuli Urpathiyalargal Sangam also enjoyed the benefit.\(^7\) Thus, the D.M.K. union sympathized with the weaving class and redressed their grievances. They withdrew the strike.\(^8\) The impact of the intervention of the D.M.K. union was that large number of weavers became D.M.K. party members and the D.M.K. party began to grow in this part of Tamil Nadu. The workers who suffered got benefit out of it. Even though some of them had hatred towards D.M.K. they did not oppose it openly.\(^9\) The labourers felt that this was not the end of the struggle and it was only the beginning of a long struggle.

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\(^7\) Personal interview, Wahab, M.Y.A., 18 December 2011.
\(^8\) Petition, Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Javuli Urpathiyalargal Sangam, Nagercoil, 10.8.1970.
\(^9\) Personal Interview with Thomas, 20 December 2011.
The 1972 Struggle

The period between 1960 and 1970 witnessed lull as far as the working class movement was concerned. Even though the labourers had minor grievances the proprietors settled them now and then. During 1970 they attempted to influence the government for the supply of control priced yarn without any shortage. The Government responded it without any hesitation.\(^\text{10}\) In spite of that the trade union activities began to grow.

The peaceful industrial climate prevailed between 1953 and 1970 and the attractive profits induced the proprietors to add more and more looms in their factories. New entrepreneurs also began to establish handloom factories. This led to a great demand for weavers. A stiff competition emerged among the entrepreneurs in enlisting expert labourers. They offered attractive terms to the labour force to lure the excellent weavers. This paved the way for wage differences in different factories.\(^\text{11}\) The wage differences among the labourers who produced the same variety of cloth induced the labourers to think of their wage structure and their nature of work.

\(^{10}\) G.O.No. 30 A, dated 21,7,1990.

\(^{11}\) Memorandum, 11.11.1971, p. 2.
The wage structure in handloom industry was that the weavers were paid on the basis of their production. In the process of weaving, the weavers used warps in the looms. The processing of warp needed the involvement of a number of labourers.\textsuperscript{12} Every weaver had to bear the cost of the labour involved in the processing of warp which he used in the loom. Thus a weaver who was a labourer in the handloom industry paid the other labourers involved in the pre-wearing process and thus they were exploited.\textsuperscript{13} The labourers began to think of the anomaly and discussed the wage structure among themselves.

An entrepreneur from Madurai established a handloom factory at Vadassery called the Southern Textiles. In a bid to attract the best labourers from the labour market he gave certain concessions to the labourers. He reorganized the wage structure of the weavers of his factory in such a way that the charge of processing warps was not collected from the wages of the weavers.\textsuperscript{14} So the weavers of Southern Textiles were fortunate enough because they received a higher wage than the weavers of other factories. The higher wages for weavers in the Southern Textiles compelled the weavers of other factories to think

\textsuperscript{12} Memorandum, 11.11.1971, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{13} Personal Interview, Varghese, Aruhuvilai, 12 November 2011.
\textsuperscript{14} Personal interview, Arunachalam, N., Vadassery, 22 December 2011.
of a change in their wage structure. The wage difference became a burning issue for discussion among the labourers. The labourers of Monies Textiles demanded the benefit which was enjoyed by the weavers of the Southern Textiles. The proprietor of Monies Textiles accepted the demand and followed the wage pattern of the Southern Textiles.  

Around 1972, the labourers began to organize strike under various trade unions affiliated to different political parties. The CITU leaders and the functionaries of CPI (M) approached the labourers and tried to kindle the feelings of the workers in the weaving industry. Among the labourers, Krishnan Nair from Aruvikkara, came to the forefront to expose the cause of the handloom labourers. The leaders of CPI (M) utilized his services to organize the weavers.

In 1972, the trade union leaders of CPI (M) comrades M.A. Ali, K. Velayudham, N. Krishnan Nair and others visited different handloom factories and held talks with the workers. The collection of

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15 Unpublished Handwritten Manuscripts, p. 2.
16 Mr. N. Krishnan Nair, a small tea shop proprietor in Aruvikkara, Kerala State was an active member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). When his tea shop business was unsuccessful due to his political involvement, he migrated to Nagercoil in order to seek an alternative livelihood. He with the guidance of the CPI (M) leaders entered the handloom weaving industry and worked as a weaver in the Southern Textiles.
17 Personal interview, Velayudham, N., Ozhuginassery, 12 November 2011.
cost of processing warps from the weaver’s wage was the vital issue discussed in the meetings. The leaders clearly explained the exploitation of the labourers by the proprietors. A demand notice was prepared and served to the proprietors. In each factory, the workers signed the demand notice and the labour leaders served the same to the proprietors.\textsuperscript{18} According to the demand notice, the workers demanded:

1. The salary of the weavers should be enhanced on par with the workers who were working in other industries.

2. The cost of processing warps should not be collected from the wages of the workers.

3. The bonus of the workers to be increased reasonably.\textsuperscript{19}

Even though certain factory owners like Monies Textiles accepted the demand of the labourers, majority of the proprietors refused to accept the same. So the labourers entered into strike and followed pressure tactics to get their demands conceded.\textsuperscript{20} They indulged in slogan shouting, gate meetings and dharna.\textsuperscript{21} The proprietors were unwilling to sit for a talk with the labourers. They avoided facing the labour force because they were still influenced by

\textsuperscript{18} Personal interview with Arunachalam, N., Vadassery, 12 November 2012.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Personal interview with Velayudham, 12 November 2012.

\textsuperscript{21} Strike Notice, 9.10.1972.
the reminiscence of the 1952 struggle. The workers of all the mills struck work.

The strike continued for more than twenty days. The workers resorted to slogan shouting in front of the factories. They even conducted gate meetings and in the gate meetings in an attempt to evoke sympathy of the general public and factory workers, they highlighted the sufferings of the workers. After that they sat in dharna in front of the factories and did not allow anyone to enter in to the office or come out from the office. The labourers lost their patience and resorted to gherao the proprietors.\textsuperscript{22} When the labourers entered into the drastic attempt of gheraoing the proprietors, they, with much hesitation came forward for a talk. The proprietors finally decided to concede the demand.\textsuperscript{23} The new labour force in the seventies which was ignorant of the trade union activists now understood the potentiality of their bargaining power. By this agitation they came to the conclusion that the trade union movement was necessary to safeguard their interest.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Personal interview, Velayudhan, K., Ozhuginassery, 12 November 2012.
\textsuperscript{23} Personal interview, Wahab, M.Y.A., Thengapattinam, 21 November 2011.
\textsuperscript{24} Personal interview, Velayudham, K., Ozhuginassery, 12 November 2012.
The success of 1972 struggle had its impact on the working class. It induced trade union activities among the factory workers. The movement infused courage in their minds. Another impact of 1972 struggle was that it caused discontentment between the D.M.K. sponsored trade union and the CITU. Upto 1970, Kumari Mavatta Dravida Kaithari Nesavalar Sangam with its rapport with the proprietors due to political affiliation and its party men in power successfully conducted the movement for the cause of the labourers. But the 1972 agitation was organized due to the pressure of the CITU leaders and functionaries. The achievement in the struggle helped the Aikkiya Kaithari Nesavu Thozhilalar Sangam to muste support from the labourers of handloom industry. So in order to control the erosion of its popularity and to consolidate its support the D.M.K. reorganized its trade union in the handloom industry. The Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Nesavalar Sangam came into existence.  

The 1974 Onam Struggle

In 1974, when the Onam Festival was nearing, the labourers planned to get a higher bonus than what they got in the previous year.

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25 Personal interview, Ramaswamy, C., Vadassery, 6 November 2011.
26 Onam festival during the month of August is an important state sponsored festival throughout Kerala State. The people of Kanyakumari District also celebrate this festival with much pomp and show.
They aimed for an enhanced wage also. In order to press their demands, the workers formed a Joint Action Council of various trade unions. Advocate Thiagarajan, the President of the Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Nesavalar Sangam was the elected President of the Joint Action Council. R. Velayudham, the Secretary of the Aikkiya Kaithari Nesavu Thozhilalar Sangam was elected as the Secretary. They prepared a charter of nine demands. The charter of demands consisted of the following demands.

1. Improve the working condition.
2. Two months salary as bonus.
3. Enhanced wage for weavers.
4. Increase in salary.
5. Medical allowances to the workers.
6. Uniformity of leave for the workers of all the weaving factories.
8. Supply of yarn to all the textiles at Government controlled price.
9. To create a welfare fund to the workers.

Demand notices were served to the proprietors of all the weaving factories. The proprietors were not willing to concede the

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27 Personal interview, Velayudham, K., Ozhuginassery, 12 November 2012.
28 Demand Notice circulated on August 30, 1974.
demands of the Joint Action Council because they thought that the important demands put forward by the labourers such as two months wage as bonus, Employees Provident Fund were not possible to implement.\textsuperscript{29} As all these attempts failed to evoke any response from the proprietors, they resorted to sit in strike in a number of factories like Ranies Textiles, Southern Textiles and Monies Textiles. The proprietors having no other alternative sought the help of the police and the agitating labourers were removed from the factories. By this time, it was reported that heavy damages were caused in the Ranies Textiles and Southern Textiles by the agitating labourers. The proprietors declared lock out for their factories and the agitating workers prolonged their agitation.\textsuperscript{30} The proprietors left Nagercoil and stayed elsewhere in order to avoid any negotiation with the labourers.

Political parties took the cause of the weavers and organized public meetings. The CPI (M) leaders Comrades Hemachandran, Divakaran and Perumal and the D.M.K. leaders Thiraviam and G.M. Shah addressed the public meetings in support of the demands of the weavers.\textsuperscript{31} The lock out prolonged and the proprietors were not

\textsuperscript{29} Personal interview, Nathan, K.U., Ozhuginassery, 28 December 2011.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid}.
available for negotiations. So the trade union leaders organized pressure tactics.\(^{32}\)

A relay fast was organized in front of the Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Javuli Urpathiyalargal Sangam at Thaziyapuram Street, Vadassery. The President of the Joint Action Council of trade unions resorted to fast unto death. In order to attract the attention of the Government, they organized a procession march towards the District Collector’s Office. Nine thousand weavers from various parts of the District participated in the procession. They submitted an appeal to the Collector to intervene.\(^{33}\) A public hartal was organized on 11.9.1974.\(^{34}\) The public hartal evoked good response at Vadassery and Ozhuginassery. The Nagara Pavu Ularthum Thozhilalar Sangam supported the cause of the agitating weavers and they participated in the relay fast. They wholeheartedly took part in the hartal.\(^{35}\)

**Pacha Mattai Agitation**

Due to the prolonged lock out, the weavers lost their income and they had no means to earn their daily bread. Under the leadership of


\(^{34}\) *Ibid*.

M. Thavasimuthu, who belonged to the Aikkiya Kaitha Nesavu Thozhilalar Sangam collected money from the public and provided food to the starving weavers. The agitating weavers resorted to novel devices such as preparing gruel in front of the houses of the proprietors and supplying it to the starving labourers and their children, breaking empty pots in front of the houses of the proprietors to make it known that they had nothing to cook in their kitchen and laid ‘Pacha Mattai’ in front of the houses of the masters as a token for the demise of somebody in the proprietor’s house, probably the master.

**Paadai Procession**

The pachamattai agitation did not bring any change in the attitude of factory owners. The problem of the agitating staff increased day after day. Their anger knew no bounds. Hence in an attempt to irritate the factory owners, the agitators resorted to paadai oorvalam. Paadai oorvalam is a common practice in the Hindu society signifying death of a person. The agitating workers of each factory carried the paadai either from the gate of the factory or house of the owners. On the way to the Ozhuginassery river, they shouted oppari, conch was

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36 Personal Interview, Thavasimuthu, M., Nagercoil, 19 November 2012.
blown and performed the last rites at the bank of river Palayar at Ozhuginassery.\textsuperscript{38}

All these attempts of the agitating weavers did not bear fruit. In the meantime the police arrested the President of the Joint Action Council and sent him to the hospital to save his life from death. K. Velayudham, Secretary of the Joint Action Council sat fast unto death along with other weavers.\textsuperscript{39}

During the course of this agitation, it was reported that a large number of personal assaults on the proprietors occurred. The houses of the proprietors of Ranies Textiles, Subash Textiles and Monies Textiles were attacked. The agitating weavers gheroed Subramoniam, one of the proprietors of Monies Textiles at Vadassery. Ranies Textiles factory suffered damage due to fire. The labourers resorted to stone throwing on the house of Thillaianandam, Manager of T. Marimuthu Textiles as they felt that he was responsible for the adamant attitude of the proprietors.\textsuperscript{40} There was an assault on Rajaram, son of Sinthamony, one of the proprietors of Monies

\textsuperscript{38} Personal interview with Mr. Thomas and Chelliah on 12 November 2013.
\textsuperscript{39} Personal interview, Nathan, K.U., Ozhuginassery, 19 November 2012.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}
Textiles. The police registered a number of criminal cases against the labour leaders and the labourers. The agitation in Nagercoil town attracted the attention of the weavers of handloom throughout Tamil Nadu. The weavers of Sellur, Madurai sympathized with the workers of Kanyakumari district and resorted to one day token strike.

**The Conciliation Talk**

The struggle began to spread to the other parts of Tamil Nadu. Understanding the gravity of the situation, the Government decided to take serious steps to settle the issue. The Assistant Commissioner of Labour (Conciliation) tried his best to settle the labour dispute. When such attempts failed, various stages of talks were held in the presence of the Tahsildar of Agastheeswaram, the Revenue Divisional Officer of Nagercoil and the Collector of Kanyakumari District. During the various stages of talk, the Urpathiyalargal Sangam Manager, K.U. Nathan; Marimuthu Company Manager Thillaianandam, Proprietor of Ranies Textile N. Arunachalam; S. Kesavaperumal of Sivathanu Textiles and M. Moni of Rajan Weaving Factory represented the proprietors. The labour leaders who participated in the talks were K.L.S. Santhanam of AITUC, N. Krishnan Nair, K. Velayutham,
P. Perumal belonged to CITU and D.M.K. leader P. Kittappan and V. Thanappan. The proprietors refused to sign a written agreement. The proprietors accepted to declare 8.33 per cent bonus, agreed to give a marginal rise of wages and agreed to give an advance to the weavers for the strike period. The struggle prolonged for forty four days and came to an end on the eve of Deepavali. Thus the labourers won and they felt that it was just the beginning of their long struggle and they have decided to achieve all the benefits that are allowed in the Factory Acts.

After the struggle in 1974, the Joint Action Council ceased to function. The D.M.K. sponsored Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Nesavalar Sangam also suffered a setback when its leader Advocate Thiagarajan joined the AIADMK.

**Labour Movement after the Bonus Struggle**

In 1975, the weavers, due to the initiative of the Aikkiya Kaithari Nesavu Thozhilalar Sangam demanded to reform the wage structure. They insisted that instead of piece rates, rates based on square feet should be considered for fixing the wages of the weavers. When the weavers resorted to agitation, N. Arunachalam, proprietor of

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43 Personal interview, Nathan, K.U., Ozhuginassery, 29 December 2012.
Ranies Textiles accepted the demand because it was profitable to the proprietors. He explained his fellow proprietors the benefits of such a device and made them to accept the demand. As a result, the agitation that the labourers were planning could not be held.

1975 Emergency and After

Between the years 1975 and 1977, even though the labourers of handloom industry demanded enhanced wages and increased bonus, no agitation could be conducted because emergency in the country was declared by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. During this period, the trade union activity lost its momentum. But the Government introduced certain reforms to improve the socio-economic condition of the weavers.

After Emergency

The emergency came to an end in 1977. The working class began to accelerate their trade union activities. The D.M.K. Government too reorganized its trade union. The Kumari Mavatta Kaithari Nesavu Thozhilalar Munnetta Sangam came into existence.

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44 Personal interview, Nathan, K.U., Ozhuginassery, 29 December 2012.
45 A revision of minimum wage was brought into effect from 3 December 1975 by G.O.Ms. No. 913 LE, dated 24 November 1975.
During the advent of the Onam festival, the D.M.K. trades union served notices to the proprietors on 17.7.1978 demanding 15 percent bonus and an enhanced wages to the weavers. The CITU followed the D.M.K. Negotiations started and an oral settlement was arrived. The proprietors accepted to declare 9 percent bonus for the year 1978. But the proprietors of nice variety refused to accept the settlement. Talks were held and failed. The workers resorted to agitation. The proprietors of nice variety yielded to pressure and the weavers received 9 percent bonus.

In February 1979, the Aikkiiya Kaithari Nesavu Thozhilalar Sangam and Kumari Mavatta Kaithari Nesavu Thozhilalar Munnetta Sangam demanded wage rise. The AIADMK trade union also supported their demand. All trade unions organized a Joint Action Council to carry on the struggle. They resorted to agitational approach. Gate meetings, procession march and slogan shouting were held. Talks were held and in the final settlement on 26 March 1979, the proprietors accepted to increase the wage by 10 percent.

The CITU sponsored General Workers Union in handloom industry demanded wage rise and entered into one day token strike on 25 April 1979. When they resorted to indefinite strike, the proprietors declared lock out from 7 May 1979. So a large majority of the labourers lost their income. The labourers were worst affected than the proprietors. The CPI (M) advised the leaders of CITU to settle the labour dispute as early as possible to facilitate the weavers to resume their work. So the strike was withdrawn without any benefits to the staff concerned.

During August 1979, on the eve of the Onam festival, the labourers demanded 25 percent of bonus. But the proprietors refused to concede the demand of the labour unions.

Thus the Working Class Movement that was started between 1970 – 1979 did not bring much improvement. The workers got benefit then and there. But the major demands such as regular yearly bonus, increase in salary and better sanitation continued. The workers were awaiting to organize a strong movement in the near future.

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48 Handbill, Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Javuli Urpathiyalargal Sangam, n.d.
49 Letter of the Secretary, Nagercoil Nagar Kaithari Javuli Urpathiyalargal Sangam, 22.8.1979, p. 2.