Appendix –VIII

STRIKES

Gandhi’s reactions on seeing the large growth of strike wave in the early 1920s

Strikes are the order of the day.¹ They are a symptom of the existing unrest. All kinds of vague ideas are floating in the air. A vague hope inspires all, and great will be the disappointment if that vague hope does not take definite shape. The labour world in India, as elsewhere, is at the mercy of those who set up as advisers and guides. The latter are not always scrupulous, and not always wise even when they are scrupulous. The labourers are dissatisfied with their lot. They have every reason for dissatisfaction. They are being taught, and justly, to regard themselves as being chiefly instrumental in enriching their employers. And so it requires little effort to make them lay down their tools. The political situation, too, is beginning to affect the labourers of India. And there are not wanting labour leaders who consider that strikes may be engineered for political purposes.

In my opinion, it will be a most serious mistake to make use of labour strikes for such a purpose. I don’t deny that such strikes can serve political ends. But they do not fall within the plan of non-violent non-co-operation. It does not require much effort of the intellect to perceive that it is a most dangerous thing to make political use of labour until labourers understand the political condition of the country and are prepared to work for the common good. This is hardly to be expected of them all of a sudden and until they have bettered their own condition so as to enable them to keep body and soul together in a decent manner. The greatest political contribution, therefore, that labourers can make is to improve their own condition, to become better informed, to insist on their rights, and even to demand proper use by their employers of the manufactures in which they have had such an important hand. The proper evolution, therefore, would be for the labourers to raise themselves to the status of part proprietors. Strikes, therefore, for the present should only take place for the direct betterment of the labourers’ lot, and when they have acquired the spirit of patriotism, for the regulation of prices of their manufactures.

¹ There were 200 strikes in India during 1920, and no fewer than 400 in 1921.
The conditions of a successful strike are simple. And when they are fulfilled a strike need never fail.

1. The cause of the strike must be just.
2. There should be practical unanimity among the strikers.
3. There should be no violence used against non-strikers.
4. Strikers should be able to maintain themselves during the strike period without falling back upon Union funds and should therefore occupy themselves in some useful and productive temporary occupation.
5. A strike is no remedy when there is enough other labour to replace strikers. In that case, in the event of unjust treatment or inadequate wages or the like, resignation is the remedy.
6. Successful strikers have taken place even when all the above conditions have not been fulfilled, but that merely proves that the employees were weak and had a guilty conscience. We often made terrible mistakes by copying bad examples. The safest thing is not to copy examples of which we have rarely complete knowledge but to follow the conditions which we know and recognize to be essential for success.

It is the duty of every well-wisher of the country, if we are to attain swaraj during the year, not to precipitate any action that may even by a day retard the fulfillment of the great national purpose.

Young India, 16-2-1921